

Singing with Moses and the Lamb:
Social Memory and Radical Discipleship in John's Apocalypse

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

The Apocalypse reads as a kind of “discipleship manual” for the *ekklesiai* living in Asia Minor under Roman administration. It calls for followers of the Lamb to reject easy compliance with the world of empire, and to embrace instead a costly alternative of witness and resistance. This study applies learnings from social memory theory to illuminate the political struggle in the Apocalypse: it considers how memory functions in antiquity to build a shared narrative of “Romanness;” how the Apocalypse’s strategy of drawing on Hebrew scriptures articulates a “counter-discourse” to Roman hegemony; how worship recalls this distinctive memory and re-narrates the world through it; and finally, how memory functions in the important imperative to “remember and repent” (2:5, 3:3). The study concludes that John is quite aware of the dynamics of power at work in his social world and memory is one basis on which he confronts this power. Through memory, the Apocalypse nurtures an alternative way of seeing the world, forges an alternative identity to “being Roman,” and animates an alternative life-practice. Deep memory is crucial for the *ekklesiai* to embody the way of the Lamb as a sustained alternative to ordinary civic life in the empire.

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Chapter 1: Theorizing Power, Memory, and Resistance

“The Uses of Forgetting.” In the Hebrew Bible they are not to be found. The Bible only knows the terror of forgetting. Forgetting, the obverse of memory, is always negative, the cardinal sin from which all others will flow.

- Y. H. Yerushalmi¹

Since memory is actually a very important factor in struggle... if one controls people's memory, one controls their dynamism.

- Michael Foucault²

There is little debate among scholars that John's highly symbolic visions on Patmos, concerned as they are with angels, beasts, celestial bodies and otherworldly visions, in fact reflect concerns rooted in John's own historical world. “We are not talking about stars but about churches. We are not really eating books; we are prophesying,” David Barr writes. “The first point, then, is to keep our heads in the midst of all this exotic symbolism and remember we are hearing about quite common, everyday realities.”³ The common, everyday realities taken up by the Apocalypse are the patterns of political, economic, and liturgical life under Rome in first-century Asia Minor.⁴ Over the past decade of New Testament studies, interpreters have used the category “empire” to name the political context of John and his readers.

We need not read far into the Apocalypse to find that this issue of political and economic power pervades John's vision. From the very first chapter, we encounter images of thrones and kingdoms and rule and authority. John introduces Jesus Christ to his readers (the messianic title

¹ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 108.

² Michael Foucault, “Film and Popular Memory,” *Radical Philosophy* 11 (1975), 25.

³ David L. Barr, “The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis,” *Interpretation* 38 (1984): 40-41.

⁴ For an overview of the political and economic issues at stake, any of the following resources offer an excellent starting point: Richard Bauckham, “The Economic Critique of Rome in Revelation 18,” in *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (New York: T&T Clark, 1993), 338-383; J. Nelson Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics, and Devotion in the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010); N.T. Wright, “Revelation and Christian Hope: Political Implications of the Revelation to John,” in *Revelation and the Politics of Apocalyptic Interpretation*, ed. Richard B. Hays and Stefan Alkier (Waco: Baylor Press, 2012); Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999); Adela Yarbro Collins, “The Political Perspective of the Revelation to John,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96/2 (1977): 241-256.

Χριστός occurs three times in the opening five verses) as “ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5), and ascribes to Jesus “glory and dominion forever and ever” (1:6). Scenes of heavenly worship offer “honour and glory and power” to God (4:11; 11:17), even while chapters 13 and 14 present visions and counter-visions of lamb and beast each with significant and dedicated followings. In John’s symbolic universe, “the whole earth” follows the beast with wonder and worship (13:3), while 144,000 stand on Mount Zion and “follow the Lamb wherever he goes” (14:4). The first half of the Apocalypse reaches its climactic moment at 11:15: “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.” John sees the reality of empire as fundamentally in conflict with the witness of the Lamb and the purposes of God in history. We best see the Apocalypse, again in concert with modern interpreters, as a struggle over the question, *who is Lord of this world?* And more to the point, *whom will the churches follow* as they live their everyday political lives?

John focuses his rhetoric on the struggle between Jesus and Caesar, between an economy of gift “without price” (22:17) and an economy of mammon trading in “human souls” (18:11-13). However, he does so in a struggle for the hearts and minds of the *ekklesiai*⁵ of Asia Minor. His intent, as I read it, is not to comfort but to admonish. This in itself is no small point: many interpreters have seen blood covering the pages of the Apocalypse and assumed John aims to speak a word of comfort or catharsis during a time of intense persecution. Yet in the seven “letters” of Rev 2-3, it is not at all clear that the *ekklesiai* were experiencing persecution on the basis of their faith. Nor is there historical evidence showing widespread persecution of Christians in the first century. As we will see below, some Christians appear to fit in quite well as tradespeople, merchants, and civic leaders in Rome’s imperial world. Given this important

⁵ I use *ekklesiai* rather than “church” to avoid reading modern assumptions about Christian communities anachronistically into the text.

observation, the trope “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable” comes to mind. John admonishes the *ekklesiai* to clarify their allegiances and strengthen their discipleship practices, that they might not become so enthralled with the comforts of empire that they lose sight of the commands of Jesus (1:3) and the concerns of God in history.

It is not my purpose in this study to argue for the political and economic perspective of the Apocalypse. That work has been done elsewhere, and I simply assume it here. Instead, I am interested in the question that comes next: namely, what does John’s critique of empire mean for the *ekklesiai* as discipleship communities? Prompted by the exhortation to “remember and repent” (2:5, 3:3), I set out to show how memory becomes a basis on which John contests imperial identities and shapes an alternative life for the *ekklesiai*: one characterized by consistent resistance and faithful witness.

This is a study about the intersection of power and memory in the pages of the Apocalypse. This first chapter sets a conceptual framework by surveying some key studies on the workings of empire and social memory. I drive towards understanding memory as a site of social struggle against imperial rule.

I. Imperial Power and Resistance

Empire: Towards a Definition

As recent scholarly attention has shown, the Hebrew and Christian scriptures take interest in the history of Israel as a history lived under the rise and fall of empires: Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Persia, Greece, and finally Rome.⁶ In reference to these texts, the reality of empire is felt by Israel as military conquest, exile, and loss of self-determination, the horror of which is given its most vehement expression, for example, in Psalm 137. In other words, the experience

⁶ See, for example, *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); Wes Howard-Brook, *Come Out, My People: God’s Call Out of Empire in the Bible and Beyond* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010).

of empire includes at its most basic level political and military domination of a subject people by a foreign power. But can more be said?

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza contends that discussions about empire in biblical studies, centered as they are on military conquest, often fail to account for the “interstructured and multiplicative dominations” experienced by the majority of human persons throughout history, particularly by women and others low in the social pyramid.⁷ Poor women in conquered regions of the Roman Empire were subject not only to Rome’s formidable military might, but also to various other dominations including limited economic prospects and a subordinate position in the patriarchal household. Such an arrangement is not incidental to, but part and parcel of, imperial domination – insofar as the household, with the father (*pater familias*) firmly in charge, becomes a microcosm of the empire where Caesar as supreme father (*pater patriae*) is in charge.⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza introduces the term *kyriocentrism* as a syllogism for empire in an effort to raise critical awareness of these various intersecting dominations. The *kyrios* in *kyriocentrism* indicates domination by emperor, lord, master, father, husband, and elite propertied male. Her analysis brings into view issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, along with the more traditional categories of political and military dominance. All these are for Schüssler Fiorenza “descriptive of the workings of empire.”⁹

As Schüssler Fiorenza has broadened the category of empire to depict a web of self-reinforcing domination structures, others have seen empire as a useful category to describe not only a particular historical setting (e.g. Rome), but also a broad ideological pattern of domination that reasserts itself at different times in history with the same “power from above.” As an

⁷ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 13-15.

⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Power of the Word*, 178.

⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Power of the Word*, 14.

example, Rome followed Babylon by about 400 years – but the two are conflated into one reality in John’s mind (18:2). Commenting on the use of Babylon as a biblical archetype of empire, Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther write, “Babylon exists wherever sociopolitical power coalesces into an entity that stands against the worship of YHWH alone.”¹⁰ Similarly, Paul Minear clarifies:

The best procedure is not first to locate Babylon as a particular city, and then to attribute these sins to that city, but first to grasp the character of the sins, and then to infer that where they are found, there is Babylon.¹¹

The process described here – first grasp the character, then discern the presence – opens space for interpreters to see that while Revelation speaks to the particularities of late first century imperial Rome, it also offers ideological critique and discipleship imperative wherever the sins of Babylon might be found.¹²

Keeping in mind these two movements – the movement to broaden analysis of domination beyond military conquest, the movement to broaden interpretation to include the many manifestations of empire both historical and contemporary – we are still in search of a suitable definition. I find the approach of Ched Myers helpful at this point. Myers, echoing theorist Edward Said and historian W.A. Williams, names the “irreducible meaning” of empire as “geopolitical control of the periphery by the centre.”¹³ He goes on to qualify that the line

¹⁰ Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, 158.

¹¹ Paul Minear, “Ontology and Ecclesiology in the Apocalypse,” *NTS* 13 (1996): 151. Schüssler Fiorenza says likewise, “if we would understand apocalyptic language as poetic language i.e. as opening up rather than limiting, as evoking rather than defining meanings... then would we be able to perceive the strength of the image with all its possible overtones of meanings for the writer as well as for the audience” (“The Followers of the Lamb: Visionary Rhetoric and Socio-Political Situation,” *Semeia* 36 [1986], 129).

¹² This includes contemporary manifestations of empire that some have named the *Pax Americana* and the *empire of global capital*. The present study limits its argument to the historical setting of Asia Minor under Roman imperial rule, but it would not take much to imagine this study extending to our contemporary *locus imperium* at a number of touchpoints. See Howard-Brook and Gwyther (*Unveiling Empire*, 236-277); Schüssler Fiorenza (*Power of the Word*, 36-40). For contemporary prophetic reading see most especially Daniel Berrigan (*The Nightmare of God* [Portland: Sunburst Press, 1983]).

¹³ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A political reading of Mark’s story of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 6.

between centre and periphery is never strictly geographical: many within the gates of the metropolis may still be marginal.¹⁴

While this analysis is contemporary, Myers has rightly seen that the centre-periphery model is germane also to the world of imperial Rome, a perspective more fully developed in our next chapter. A couple of viewpoints from the era illustrate some aspects of the centre-periphery model. Aelius Aristides celebrates in his *Eulogy to Rome*:

Produce is brought from every land and every sea, depending on what the seasons bring forth, and what is produced by all lands, rivers and lakes and the arts of Greeks and barbarians. If anyone wants to see it all he must travel over the whole earth to see it in such a way or come to this city. For what grows and is produced among individual peoples is necessarily always here, and here in abundance.¹⁵

The social critic Tacitus speaks of this same “imperial glory” from a different rhetorical angle:

“to ravage, to slaughter, to usurp under false titles, they call empire; and where they make a desert, they call it peace.”¹⁶ The process of extracting wealth from the provinces to feed the centre is just one target taken on by the prophet of Patmos.

Hegemony and Domination: World-Ordering Power

Anathea Portier-Young, in her study *Apocalypse Against Empire*, seeks to understand how the power of empire relates to the emergence of early Jewish apocalypses including Daniel, the Apocalypse of Weeks, and the Book of Dreams.¹⁷ She contends that these early apocalypses emerged as resistance literature to Seleucid rule over Judea. While Portier-Young does not extend her study to consider John’s Apocalypse and other early Christian apocalypses, her approach is instructive for our purposes. She begins by affirming that empire derives its primary

¹⁴ Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 6.

¹⁵ Aelius Aristides, *Eulogy to Rome* 11.

¹⁶ Tacitus, *Agricola* 30.

¹⁷ Anathea E. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), xxii. See also Richard Horsley’s study, published concurrently with Portier-Young: *Revolt of the Scribes: Resistance and Apocalyptic Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

power from its “power to order the world.”¹⁸ This world-ordering power is exercised not only through force, but also through a range of social institutions.

Drawing on Antonio Gramsci’s work, Portier-Young understands imperial power through the dual lenses of *hegemony* and *domination*. Domination refers to overtly political and violent means of coercion such as laws, imprisonment, killing, and torture. Crucifixion is one such example of state terrorism, which put on public display the terrifying results of daring to contradict Rome’s interests. Through these and other means of coercion and fear, empire exerts direct control over the bodies of its subjects. Hegemony on the other hand points to “non-violent forms of control exercised through the whole range of dominant cultural institutions and social practices, from schooling, museums, and political parties to religious practice, architectural forms, and mass media.”¹⁹ Hegemony speaks to the ability of empire to prescribe very specific social arrangements wherein individual interests and the empire’s interests appear to be one and the same. Empire consolidates its power at the point when individuals understand that their best opportunity to succeed in society flows from behaving as good and compliant imperial citizens.

Rome’s program of aggressive urbanization in the provinces provides an example of these non-violent forms of control. Building baths and aqueducts, theatres and gymnasiums, fountains, colonnades, temples, and schools, Rome won compliance from its subjects without needing to maintain constant military pressure. Tacitus laments in Britain in 78 CE the compliance given to the Romans by simple seduction. The Roman governor Agricola “began to train the sons of the chieftains in a liberal education” and seduced the Britons through “alluring vices” such as pillared halls, baths and choice banquets.²⁰ Tacitus notes the lure of becoming

¹⁸ Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire*, xxii.

¹⁹ Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire*, 11.

²⁰ Tacitus, *Agricola* 21.

‘civilized’ and ‘cultured’ in Roman eyes, which leads to enslavement. In this way, hegemony reinforces dominant power by winning compliance through consent rather than coercion.²¹

Portier-Young additionally draws on the work of Daniel Miller and Pierre Bourdieu to emphasize a second, *cosmological* dimension of hegemony:

Hegemony asserts as normative and universal what are in fact particular and contingent ways of perceiving the world, mapping the universe and humanity’s place in it, and defining poles of opposition. This cosmology demarcates inside from outside, centre from periphery, normal from aberrant. Its logic legitimates claims about truth and morality, but this very logic can become so invisible as to resist questioning.²²

The goal of hegemony is thus to define a singular, totalizing worldview that drives out alternatives, so that the imperial social order no longer resembles an institution of subjugation but becomes quite simply “common sense,” a natural state of affairs. This worldview may encompass everything from economic practice and social institutions to family structure and gender roles. To the extent that a hegemonic worldview is internalized by imperial subjects, “the merely possible appears necessary, the contingent appears absolute, and ways of ordering human life that have taken shape through time appear to be part of nature.”²³ As James C. Scott argues, outbursts of creative possibility become increasingly implausible in such a structure:

It might be said that the main function of a system of domination is to accomplish precisely this: to define what is realistic and what is not realistic and to drive certain goals and aspirations into the realm of the impossible, the realm of idle dreams, of wishful thinking.²⁴

Douglas Kellner likewise sees that hegemonic ideology works within the dominant social order as a form of “indirect rule” that “induces people to consent to their society and its way of life

²¹ On this definition of hegemony, see Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (New York: Verso, 2007), 114.

²² Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire*, 12.

²³ Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire*, 12.

²⁴ James C Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 326.

[...] providing theories about the economy, state, or education that legitimate certain dominant institutions and ideas, and prescribe conformist acceptance.”²⁵ We might say that hegemonic ideology provides certain authorized scripts that actors (imperial subjects) feel compelled to perform. Performance of this script supports imperial interests and builds the imperial narrative. Cultural institutions of hegemony aim to make it exceedingly improbable that actors will feel compelled to break character or move off-script, or begin writing a script of their own.

In sum, we have a dilemma. If our perspective of the imperial order is shaped at the centre, we might see with Aelius Aristides, “the existing conditions are *naturally satisfying* and useful for both the poor and the rich, and *there is no other way of living*.”²⁶ But if we adopt a perspective sympathetic with the periphery, standing with Tacitus and John of Patmos we must grapple with strategies to resist a power that defines the very terms on which knowledge is organized and reality is understood. Terry Eagleton sums up sharply: “How do we combat a power which has become the ‘common sense’ of a whole social order, rather than one which is widely perceived as alien and oppressive?”²⁷

Counterdiscourse: Strategies for Resistance

Portier-Young identifies “articulating and promulgating counterdiscourse” as an apocalyptic strategy to resist hegemony.²⁸ On the one hand, the apocalypses provide ethical imperatives that incite readers to resistant action, directly confronting and challenging imperial rule with their bodies. On the other hand, in the very act of penning the apocalypses, scribes engaged in a war of myths against the hegemonic discourse of Antiochus IV Epiphanes and

²⁵ Douglas Kellner, “Ideology, Marxism, and Advanced Capitalism,” *Socialist Review* 42 (1978): 50.

²⁶ Aristides, *Eulogy to Rome* 66 (emphasis mine).

²⁷ Eagleton, *Ideology*, 114.

²⁸ Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire*, 12. See also Amos N. Wilder, *Jesus’ Parables and the War of Myths* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

Seleucid imperial rule.²⁹ They accomplished this by: (1) confronting myth with alternate myth; (2) revealing an alternative cosmology in the form of a narrated heavenly journey; (3) turning to history as a means of revealing the contingency of present realities; and (4) employing a strategy of critical inversion wherein the binary categories of hegemony (inside/outside, centre/periphery, good/bad, civilized/barbaric, normal/aberrant) are retained but the assignment of value is turned upside down.³⁰ The scribes claimed that Antiochus's world is not in fact normative and universal, but a thin veil that covers over reality as God sees it. With eyes to see, a different story can be told.

We will see throughout this study that John of Patmos employs similar strategies of counterdiscourse to resist Rome's imperial hegemony. David Barr, for example, sees that through John's use of symbols, readers are placed in a world where the Lamb is the Lion, the sufferer is the conqueror, and the victims become the victors.³¹ Binary categories of victory are inverted; vulnerability instead of violence is valorized. We will return to Barr's argument in a later chapter, but for the moment it is enough to notice that Barr sees the power of the apocalypse deriving not primarily from the announcement of the end of the world, nor from providing some sort of emotional therapy (what some interpreters have called "catharsis"), but from the idea that readers are decisively changed through symbols that "pull back the veil" and provide a new understanding of the world.³² Barr summarizes the effects of this symbolic transformation: "[Readers] no longer suffer helplessly at the hands of Rome; they are now in charge of their own destiny and by their voluntary suffering they participate in the overthrow of evil and the establishment of God's kingdom. They now see themselves as *actors* in charge of their own

²⁹ See also Horsley, *Revolt of the Scribes*.

³⁰ See Portier-Young, *Apocalypse*, 13-14.

³¹ See Barr, "Symbolic Transformation," 39-50.

³² Barr, "Symbolic Transformation," 49.

destiny.”³³ John of Patmos gives readers, in other words, a new script – one with the potential to animate new political lives.

I place my analysis of social memory in this framework, seeing memory, in the context of the Apocalypse, having capacity to legitimate or subvert hegemonic ideologies. Memory itself becomes a battleground in the war of myths. But that is to jump ahead perhaps too far: first, let us consider the social dynamics of memory and name some implications for our study.

II. Social Memory

Modern interest in the social dynamics of memory is generally traced back to the work of French Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. Halbwachs’ early work studied how an individual’s social groups shape private memories.³⁴ He examined especially the social contexts of family, religion, and social class: what he calls the *social frameworks of memory*. He saw that parents, friends, and others are often involved in the activities which produce the materials of memory. They prompt us to retell stories of the past, and may even shape or refine our recollection. Halbwachs also saw that memories are produced in space and time, both of which are socially inhabited sites. Even the most private memories are preserved in language, which is a social product rather than a product of individual consciousness.³⁵ Halbwachs concludes that social groups provide the materials, contexts, and cues for remembering, and that it is impossible for individuals to remember in any coherent and persistent way outside of group contexts.³⁶ For Halbwachs, memory is a matter of how minds work together in society. “It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and

³³ Barr, “Symbolic Transformation,” 50.

³⁴ See Maurice Halbwachs, *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1925).

³⁵ Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 11-12.

³⁶ Jeffrey K. Olick, “Products, Processes, and Practices: A Non-Reificatory Approach to Collective Memory,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 36.1 (2006), 11.

localize their memories.”³⁷ Jeffrey Olick adds, “even when we [remember] alone, we do so as social beings with reference to our social identities.”³⁸

In Halbwachs’ thought, it is not only the case that an individual’s memories are structured by and recalled within social frameworks. Halbwachs identifies that social groups also share *publicly articulated images of collective pasts*, a phenomenon he labels “collective memory.”³⁹ These collective pasts depend upon the social group as a whole to be articulated and sustained (cf. Deut 26:5-10). For Halbwachs, collective memory is not reducible to what is preserved in any one person’s mind. Drawing upon Durkheim’s notion of collective representations, Halbwachs claims that collective memory is common to all, not peculiar to any one person, and not entirely realized in any individual incarnation.⁴⁰ In other words, collective memory requires a social group to enact it. Halbwachs adds that collective memory is articulated and sustained especially through shared social practices of commemoration and ritual: “social practices of reinscription render collective memory available.”⁴¹

Halbwachs sees collective memory as foundational to the production of group identity. Who we are depends upon where we have come from. He argues that collective memory plays a socially conservative function within social groups, operating as ideological grounding for the present by establishing continuity with idealizations of the past.⁴² My study will dispute this claim in part, seeing John’s memory-work as a transformative attempt to radicalize (rather than stabilize) the *ekklesiai* of Asia Minor. Nevertheless, Halbwachs’ assertion that collective memory produces meaning and identity in social groups by establishing continuity with the past

³⁷ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. LA Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 38.

³⁸ Olick, “Products,” 11.

³⁹ Olick, “Products,” 11.

⁴⁰ See Maurice Halbwachs, “Individual Consciousness and Collective Mind,” *American Journal of Sociology* 44 (1939): 814-815.

⁴¹ Castelli, *Martyrdom*, 17.

⁴² Castelli, *Martyrdom*, 12.

is an important one for this study. Subsequent theorists conclude, “memories are a central, if not the central, medium through which identities are constituted.”⁴³

If Halbwachs charted an early course for memory theorists, his work has nevertheless come under substantial critique and revision. Most importantly, modern theorists almost universally reject Halbwachs’ assumption that it is meaningful to speak of an unqualified “collective” with little regard for the individuals who make up the group. Indeed, in Halbwachs’ work the individual figures only insofar as he or she is a member of various collectives, and rarely as an individual in his or her own right. This over-totalizing tendency risks disappearing the multiplicity of ways the past can be appropriated and interpreted within a group; it risks erasing dissenting voices, leaving only a dominant account of the collective past. Fentress and Wickham best summarize the mood of critics when they worry about “a concept of collective consciousness curiously disconnected from the actual thought processes of any particular person.” They warn that such a concept risks treating the individual as “a sort of automaton, passively obeying the interiorized collective will.”⁴⁴

Given the dangers and insufficiencies of talking about a simple collective, yet wanting to retain a meaningful sociology of memory, theorists have proposed a number of refinements to Halbwachs’ model. Jan Assman prefers to speak of communicative and cultural memory.⁴⁵ Fentress and Wickham refer to “social memory” rather than collective memory.⁴⁶ Olick and Robbins retain collective memory as a useful sensitizing category, but not as a precise operational definition. In their widely accepted corrective to Halbwachs, they refer to “social memory studies” as “a general rubric for inquiry into the varieties of forms through which we are

⁴³ Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, “Social Memory Studies: From ‘Collective Memory’ to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 133.

⁴⁴ James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), ix.

⁴⁵ Jan Assman, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 125-33.

⁴⁶ Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*.

shaped by the past, conscious and unconscious, public and private, material and communicative, consensual and challenged.”⁴⁷

Olick and Robbins focus on social memory as matter of products and processes:⁴⁸ memory is something that we “do,” not something that we “have.”⁴⁹ This approach, they argue, “enables us to identify ways in which past and present are intertwined without reifying a mystical group mind.”⁵⁰ The products of social memory include stories, rituals, books, statues, presentations, speeches, images, pictures, records, historical studies, surveys, etc.; while processes include reminiscence, recall, representation, commemoration, celebration, regret, renunciation, disavowal, denial, rationalization, excuse, acknowledgement, and others.⁵¹ This clarification of memory as a variety of products and processes forms a key insight for the purposes of this study.

Memory, History, and Myth

We must pause for a moment to reflect on the relationship between memory and history. “Memory is not an unchanging vessel for carrying the past into the present,” Olick and Robbins write. “Memory is a process, not a thing, and it works differently at different points in time.”⁵² If memory is not unchanging, then to what degree is memory related to “actual” pasts?

There is debate in memory studies between *traditionalist* and *presentist* positions on this question.⁵³ Traditionalist models of memory emphasize continuity and persistence, asserting that memory presents in a more or less reliable manner the “actual” events of history. Traditionalists see history as highly resistant to efforts to take it over. Memory is a matter of “repeating” these

⁴⁷ Olick and Robbins, “Social Memory Studies,” 112.

⁴⁸ Olick, “Products,” 12.

⁴⁹ Olick and Robbins, “Social Memory Studies,” 122.

⁵⁰ Olick and Robbins, “Social Memory Studies,” 112.

⁵¹ Olick, “Products,” 12.

⁵² Olick and Robbins, “Social Memory Studies,” 122.

⁵³ See Olick and Robbins, “Social Memory Studies,” 128-130.

moments. Presentist models, on the other hand, emphasize malleability, seeing memory as a process of construction that takes shape within ever-shifting social contexts. For the presentist, memory is a production in the present moment, which negotiates the needs and concerns of the present. What is remembered (selection) and how it is remembered (commemoration) is governed by present impulses. Further, memory is subject to editorializing by memory-makers with specific interests: “the past as such is not preserved in memory, but is adjusted and distorted in the interests of making that past cohere with the variable conditions of the present.”⁵⁴ Once we notice that memory is malleable, we see that it is vulnerable to shaping by powerful interests with particular ideological goals. The (re-)writing of history often accompanies efforts to propagate particular hegemonic discourses; we will see this kind of memory activity in relation to our discussion of Augustus.

Further, while the debate between traditionalists and presentists focuses on questions of historical reliability, the materials of memory need not be limited to history at all. Fentress and Wickham offer that folk tales, myths of origins, and other narratives with questionable historicity, also function as memories of shared pasts.⁵⁵ “The social meaning of memory... is little affected by its truth; all that matters is that it be believed, at least at some level – for one should not neglect folk-tales, which are commemorations of the past as well.”⁵⁶ The value of memory does not always reduce to historical reliability, but may relate more broadly to a narrative’s capacity to produce meaning. Myths, particularly myths of origins, are important products of social memory.

Elizabeth Castelli traces this dynamic at work in the making of early Christian culture. She sees that while the Christian story is rooted in a historical past – the life of Jesus having

⁵⁴ Ritva Williams, “BTB Readers’ Guide: Social Memory,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 41.4 (2011), 190.

⁵⁵ Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, 81.

⁵⁶ Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, xi.

taken place at a fixable geographic location in a series of historical moments – the Christian narrative is “no simple example of objective, exhaustive historiography.”⁵⁷ The work of memory is tied to the broader cultural project of mythmaking, which produces a usable story that “forges links within a community among its members and between the community and its claimed past.”⁵⁸ Mythmaking is a project of collective imagination, involving no small amount of framing and sifting, of emphasis and suppression. “Myth necessarily involves a heightened narrativizing of the past and a careful linking of particular stories to larger, cultural master narratives.”⁵⁹ The point, however, is not that memory falsifies the past, but rather that this work flows from the cultural need to produce “a compelling answer to urgent questions about foundations and identities.”⁶⁰ Castelli argues that questions in memory studies about “what really happened?” are not the most helpful. More helpful questions often include, “what meanings are produced?” and “what ideological impulses are satisfied?”⁶¹

In many ways then, the debate about the historicity of remembered pasts misses the point entirely. With regards to social memory, we are not really talking about the accurate preservation of pasts, but rather about the making of meaning, the project of producing a usable story. If there is to be an argument on this point, it is not rightly framed as *memory* vs. *history* but as *malleability* vs. *persistence*: to what degree are “usable pasts” produced through complex processes of collective imagination vulnerable to reshaping by the cultural pressures or political interests of the day?

⁵⁷ Castelli, *Martyrdom*, 29.

⁵⁸ Castelli, *Martyrdom*, 30.

⁵⁹ Castelli, *Martyrdom*, 30.

⁶⁰ Castelli, *Martyrdom*, 30.

⁶¹ Castelli, *Martyrdom*, 29. See also Olick, who sees memory as “an active process of meaning-making through time” (“Products,” 9).

In a world dominated by hegemonic discourses, I suggest that memory is useful precisely because of the potential for persistent pasts to confront moments of crisis with stories of alternate wisdom. Here the key claim is that memory is *persistent* enough to speak a fresh word from outside a totalizing imperial discourse: something of a counter-memory remains that has not been wholly absorbed into the hegemonizing agenda. But memory must also be *relevant* in the sense that stories from the past have not become so completely disconnected from the present social world that they have no word to speak in a new context. Memory, to be useful in any way, is a complex negotiation of this kind between past and present.

Outlining a framework

Following Jeffrey Olick, I outline three pillars of the social memory approach adopted for this study.⁶² (1) Memories are far from monolithic. One must be careful not to presume that every society has one collective memory or that it is obvious how (and which) public memories will be produced. (2) Memory is not fixed. It is a fluid negotiation between the desires of the present and the legacies of the past. This fluid negotiation opens the door for political contestation. (3) Memory is a matter of products and processes in narrative form. The nature of memory products ranges widely and is not restricted to the historical record. Myth plays an important role in the formation of social memories.

III. Social Dynamics of Memory

As the prolific literature makes clear, memory is a process that is active, constructive, and consequential. The past stakes a powerful claim on thought and behaviour in the present. I review here the most salient points, including memory's relationship to identity, perspective, and behaviour.

Memory, Identity, and Narrative

⁶² See Olick, "Products," 12-13.

When discussing the nature of personal and social identity, theorists caution against reification. Like social memory, identities are projects and performances, not fixed properties. Theorists also see that identities are closely tied to notions of narrative: “all attempts to elucidate the notion of personal identity [and, by extension, group identity] independently of and in isolation from the notions of narrative... are bound to fail.”⁶³ Often identities are plural rather than fixed and singular, incorporating a wide variety of group affiliations. Identity should be seen then as a process of ongoing reconstruction based on narrative patterns.⁶⁴ Because it is a matter of performance and not a search for an essence, identity should also be seen as dynamic and contested rather than fixed.

When it comes to social identity, we may begin by noticing that groups are, as Olick highlights, products of cultural processes rather than products of nature, imagined rather than fixed.⁶⁵ They are *socially constructed*, to invoke Berger’s language. Storytelling about the past is an important way groups reinvigorate their collective imagination and create social cohesion. Storytelling helps to “define a group, giving it a sense of its past and defining its aspirations for the future.”⁶⁶

Communities sometimes mark certain stories as being of particular significance, even if such a marking is contested and/or ideologically motivated.⁶⁷ These stories often include memories of the community’s origins – its emergence as an independent social entity – and other watershed events in the community’s history. These foundational memories are distilled and

⁶³ Olick and Robbins, “Social Memory Studies,” 122.

⁶⁴ Olick, “Products,” 8.

⁶⁵ Olick, “Products,” 5.

⁶⁶ Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, 25.

⁶⁷ Alan Kirk, “Social and Cultural Memory,” in *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity*, ed. Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 5, 7-10.

shaped into a “master narrative” which represents the core of the community’s self-understanding.

We might say that social memory is a matter of ongoing group formation. Memory not only tells a group where it comes from: it is determinative in forming identity in the present, which is to say, in “producing” the group as a cohesive body politic. “Storytelling about the past is thus not merely something communities do; it is, in important ways, what they are... storytelling about the past ‘per-forms’ the group by ‘re-member-ing’ it.”⁶⁸ An important corollary is that *social identity depends entirely upon which stories we are listening to*, which memories have been selected and adopted into the group’s master narrative. Here, processes of contestation are central.

Theorists point to the role of commemoration and ritual as primary sites where group identities are produced through collective storytelling. These practices function as symbolic discourses that evoke identification with the foundational past. Artifacts including statues, sculptures, memorials, and coins fix certain narratives by literally carving them into stone – we will see examples in a later chapter. Rituals function similarly as a form of embodied storytelling. Ritual enlists bodies into the task of rehearsing foundational narratives. We will see in the first century how emperor-worship and liturgical practices underwrite power in imperial Rome, fostering collective identities as “followers of the beast.” But for John of Patmos, worship and liturgy become important sites to challenge imperial claims on identity by rehearsing an alternate story.

⁶⁸ Kirk, “Social and Cultural Memory,” 6.

Social Frames

Human beings rarely apprehend the social order directly. Instead we apply cognitive filters (especially symbols and narratives) to apprehend and organize our knowledge about the world: this is the insight of Berger and Luckmann who understand that people are “congenitally compelled to impose a meaningful order upon reality.”⁶⁹ The narratives that make up social memory are primarily these kinds of ordering discourses. They “connect, clarify, and interpret” events by locating the community’s life within a broader narrative that flows from the past: the past helps the community *perceive* and *interpret* the world in certain ways.

Barry Schwartz has used the term “framing” to describe the process by which “invocations of the past confer meaning on present experience.”⁷⁰ He sees that communities make “semiotic connections” between present experiences and past events. Present predicaments are “keyed” to archetypal narratives which in turn “frame” the experiences with meaning. Schwartz cites as example the way early disciples found their bearings amidst the terror of crucifixion by rereading Israel’s past and integrating their experience into it. Israel’s overarching story offered resources through which these disciples could make sense of suffering and renew their resolve to continue living within the story’s frame of meaning.⁷¹

Memory, then, frames the way social groups create meaning from new experiences and the way they discern their social world. “The images, habits, and causal motifs that structure social memory provide a grid through which the present can be understood in terms of the remembered past”⁷² – memory establishes what Kirk calls “cognitive schema” or “nuclear

⁶⁹ Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1967), 22.

⁷⁰ Barry Schwartz, “Frame Image: Towards a Semiotics of Collective Memory,” *Semiotica* 121 (1998): 1.

⁷¹ Barry Schwartz, “Jesus in First-Century Memory” in *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity*, ed. Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005): 252.

⁷² Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, 198.

scripts” for interpreting and processing streams of experience.⁷³ What we are really saying is that memory contains the elements of a *worldview*: the remembered past provides symbolic resources through which the world is perceived and interpreted. For John of Patmos, invoking the name “Babylon” (18:2) is a specific way of framing his present experience by keying it to a specific memory of Israel’s past. With this one symbol, he attaches to Rome a whole history of meaning that helps his readers to understand their political world and evaluate their place within it.

Programs for Action

Communities locate their experiences within frames of meaning provided by narratives of the past. These narratives then function to shape dispositions and norms for action by providing “a program in terms of which present lines of conduct can be formulated and enacted.”⁷⁴ In short, memories have an ethical colouring; one that authorizes certain actions and discourages others. Memories are stories that contain conceptions of “what a good person is like, and the virtues that define such a character.”⁷⁵

By remembering exceptional figures and exemplary actions, social memory allows voices from the past to address actors in the present. In this process, memory offers an imaginative resource that animates and authorizes courses of action that may not otherwise be apparent. Here we can consider the potential for prophetic, local (non-hegemonic) memories to contest dominant discourse. If the function of a system of domination is, as Scott claims, “to drive certain goals and aspirations into the realm of the impossible, of wishful thinking,”⁷⁶ memory – to the extent that it has not been co-opted by a hegemonic agenda – reasserts the possibility,

⁷³ Kirk, “Social and Cultural Memory,” 15.

⁷⁴ Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 18.

⁷⁵ Robert Bellah et al, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 153.

⁷⁶ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 326.

morality, and even wisdom of actions that are from “the realm of wishful thinking.” Products and processes of memory remove the community from the limits of their hegemonic environs by relating the community’s struggle to a previous time when exemplary models demonstrated different possibilities and alternate ethical values.⁷⁷ Social memory is, in Barry Schwartz’s formulation, “a cultural program that orients our intentions, sets our moods, and enables us to act.”⁷⁸

IV. Memory as Counterdiscourse

Because memory is determinative in how minds think, eyes perceive, and bodies act, memory is not politically inert. It has capacity to animate political lives. It is not surprising then that political ideologies are often staked out on claims about the past: “most political actors know that to control the past is to control the future. We over-totalize our visions of the past to eliminate dissent, secure identity, and control change.”⁷⁹

It is often the case that a conquering power will set up schools to educate the young with its own histories and ways of thinking.⁸⁰ Sometimes it will also introduce a new calendar, a foreign way of marking the passage of time. This has the effect of disrupting the flow of time in the colonized community, making memories from the non-colonial past more difficult to comprehend and commemorate.⁸¹ In these ways, imperial hegemony begins to shift the memory of the local culture.

The process of selection is yet another mechanism to politically control memory:

⁷⁷ Portier-Young provides an example: “Daniel and his friends serve as models or types for persecuted Judeans... the heroes of the tales continue to model faithful resistance for those who suffered persecution” (*Apocalypse Against Empire*, 234).

⁷⁸ Barry Schwartz, “Memory as a Cultural System: Abraham Lincoln in World War II,” *American Sociological Review* 61 (1996): 921.

⁷⁹ Olick, “Products,” 7.

⁸⁰ Mario I. Aguilar, “The Archaeology of Memory and the Issue of Colonialism: Mimesis and the Controversial Tribute to Cesar in Mark 12:13-17,” *BTB* 35 (2005): 62. See also comments below, about teaching the *Aeneid* in schools across the empire.

⁸¹ Aguilar, “Archaeology of Memory,” 62; also Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire*, 198-99.

determining in official accounts of history what/who is recognized, and what/who is left out, has a powerful effect on the political landscape. In the case of Rome, the practice of *damnatio memoriae* is a fairly transparent effort to disappear “inconvenient” individuals from the official record. These “memory sanctions” were, in Harriett Flower’s assessment, “deliberately designed strategies that aim to change the picture of the past.”⁸²

But social groups carry their own visions of the past that may or may not conform to the dominant account. To the extent that social groups have robust practices to rehearse and revitalize their memories, these local memories can in fact be quite resilient in a struggle against hegemonizing pressures. Where Aelius Aristides claims, “there is no other way of living,” a deep counter-memory responds, “you are wrong: let me show you the way of our ancestors.”

At the symbolic level, counter-memories can provide symbolic resources that dispute the dominant account of reality. For example, the symbol Babylon in the Apocalypse, as we have already seen, draws deep connections to the past that challenges an easy acceptance of Rome. At the level of producing a narrative account of the past, a counter-memory can assert pasts that have been excluded or ignored in dominant accounts of history, ensuring these memories continue to have a voice. Vera Schwarz provides the example that “secret graves in Yugoslavia could not be lit by private candles without dimming the bright light of socialist optimism.”⁸³

Put precisely, local memories carry the potential for persistent pasts to confront totalizing empires with alternative stories and symbols. Memory plays its own role in the war of myths, making possible fresh perspectives and performances within an imaginatively impoverished imperial world.

⁸² Harriett I. Flower, *The Art of Forgetting: Disgrace and Oblivion in Roman Political Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 2.

⁸³ Vera Schwarz, *Bridge across Broken Time: Chinese and Jewish Cultural Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 95.

V. Conclusions

In sum, I offer the following observations:

1. Social memory is a process rather than a thing. The products of social memory include stories, folk tales, texts, hymns, statues, coins, and artifacts, while practices include commemoration, ritual, liturgy, celebration and lament. Memory is a complex and ongoing negotiation between needs and pressures of the present and stories of the past.
2. Memory is a primary factor in the production of group identity. Communities engage in projects of mythmaking to produce a usable story that forges links between community members and between a community and its past. This story remains relevant in the project of identity only to the extent that the community rehearses it through commemorative practices.
3. The narratives of social memory help interpret the social world through processes of “keying” and “framing”. Stories about the past also provide a program for action in terms of possibility and constraint. Exemplary figures from the past become examples and authorizing figures for negotiating present predicaments.
4. Because memory is determinative in how minds think and bodies act, memory is a site of political struggle and an effective site for counterdiscourse in the war of myths.

Chapter 2: A Geography of Discipleship Contests over Identity and Allegiance

The basic thesis of this study is that John, through strategies of social memory, is engaged in a struggle with the *ekklesiai* of Asia Minor over questions of identity and allegiance. Through the visions of the Apocalypse, John prods the *ekklesiai* to open their eyes and see the world as it really is, and on that basis to assess their allegiances and life-practice. I begin this analysis in the present chapter by mapping the contours of struggle evident in the text between the “community” of empire and the “community” of the Lamb, drawing attention in particular to the political discourse that shapes this struggle. As we will see, the Apocalypse shows acute awareness of the dynamics of power at work within the political environment, what I have called here John’s “social analysis.” Questions of identity and allegiance are not only “spiritual” or “religious” questions for John: they are also deeply political questions worked out on political grounds. The Apocalypse is a struggle over discipleship that is rooted in deep social analysis.

One text in particular will serve as a focal point as we map this contested political terrain. John’s vision of two beasts and his counter-vision of 144,000 standing on Mount Zion with the Lamb (12:18-14:5) focuses our attention on a central feature of John’s social analysis: the role of imperial myths, cults, performances, and ideologies in shaping disciples of empire. This text highlights the broad themes of power, parody, and discipleship that dominate John’s composition. At the same time, the vision of the second beast in particular grounds our study of memory within the social analysis provided by the text itself. Memory, particularly in the form of historical myth, will be discussed in subsequent chapters as one dimension of the second beast’s strategy to animate the power of empire thorough discourses of hegemony. For the moment, our focus lies not on social memory itself, but on contextualizing our study of memory within these broader themes.

Rev 12:18-14:5 introduces a series of three visions guided by the formula “and I saw” (καὶ εἶδον). Each vision introduces a character – two beasts and the Lamb – and each character inhabits a particular symbolic location. These three visions shape what I call the “political geography” of the Apocalypse, and we will spend some effort considering each in turn. Notably, no character in this political geography stands alone. Each has gathered a sizeable following, the two beasts working as one to gather the inhabitants of the earth (13:3, 13:8, 13:12) while the Lamb stands with his 144,000 companions (14:1).

I. A Political Geography of Empire (12:18 – 13:18)

Contextually, the vision of two beasts follows the action of 12:1-17. A cosmic drama unfolds in heaven, where a woman “clothed with the sun” prepares to give birth to a child. The reader senses the weightiness of events for the whole of the cosmos, the urgency that a viable child comes forth (the child alludes to the messianic child of Isa 66:7). A dragon figure appears and stands before the woman, preparing to devour her child as she gives birth. Cosmic and natural forces (12:5,16) conspire to rescue both woman and child from the dragon’s ravenous appetite. The child is miraculously taken up to God while the woman is carried off to the wilderness, beyond the dragon’s reach. Meanwhile, war breaks out. Michael and his angels engage the dragon and defeat it, throwing it out of heaven. The dragon’s defeat brings shouts of victory in heaven, but also ominous announcements of woe for the earth where the dragon is made to dwell. In a fit of rage over its defeat, the dragon sets out to make war against “the rest of [the woman’s] offspring,” whom John identifies as those who “keep the commandments of God and bear the witness (τὴν μαρτυρίαν) of Jesus” (12:17).

Adela Yarbro Collins has seen that this war motif between Michael and the dragon builds on the ancient mythological pattern of the combat myth.¹ The combat myth has origins in ancient Canaanite and Babylonian mythologies, and made its way into Hebrew thought also. The pattern is summarized as follows:

The pattern depicts a struggle between two divine beings and their allies for universal kingship. One of the combatants is usually a monster, very often a dragon. This monster represents chaos and sterility, while his opponent is associated with order and fertility. Thus their conflict is a cosmic battle whose outcome will constitute or abolish order in society and fertility in nature.²

Others have disputed the particular shape of the combat pattern and its underlying sources,³ but few dispute that this pattern of cosmological conflict lies at the heart of the Apocalypse.

Through the combat myth, John envisions his political world in terms of a battle between primeval forces of order and chaos. John is concerned, as Richard Bauckham sees, about “the victory of God over the forces of evil as they manifested themselves in his contemporary world.”⁴ This is not a “spiritual” vision of battles far removed from everyday life. The conflict between archangels and the dragon reaches into the ordinary realities of life in Asia Minor. Yet the vision remains quite aware of “spiritual” dimensions. John’s concern involves not only visible manifestations of evil that are part of the dragon’s war, but also quite possibly “the ultimate forces of evil behind all political manifestations of opposition to God.”⁵ The dragon, we see in 12:9, is also known as the ancient serpent (cf. Genesis 3), the Devil, and Satan (12:9). John

¹ Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, HDR 9 (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1976). Elements of the pattern include: a. threat, b. combat-victory, c. theophany of the divine warrior, d. salvation, e. fertility of the restored order, f. victory shout, g. temple-building, h. banquet (wedding), and i. manifestation of kingship (*Combat Myth*, 207-34). These elements are not restricted in the Apocalypse to 12:1-17: they pervade the composition as a whole.

² Collins, *Combat Myth*, 57.

³ For a discussion about possible sources, see David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, WBC 52b (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 667-74.

⁴ Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* (New York: T&T Clark, 1993), 185.

⁵ Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 187.

sees that the faithful are engaged in a struggle for the integrity and fecundity of the cosmos that is a spiritual struggle, but that works itself out in everyday life in Asia Minor. This struggle is not only against Rome, but against the cosmological forces of evil that make Rome possible.

For the moment we will not dwell on the combat myth other than to note that (1) a pattern of conflict lies at the heart of the Apocalypse, and (2) this pattern provides the literary context for the upcoming visions. The three visions of 12:18-14:5 pick up from here with the enraged dragon taking a stand on the seashore, positioned between sea and earth.⁶ Each of the three visions that follow represents a different symbolic location in the political geography of the Apocalypse.

A beast rising out of the sea

The first of the two beasts rises out of the sea. With seven heads and ten horns, this beast looks very much like the dragon that immediately precedes it (12:3, 13:1). The link is made explicit in 13:2 and 13:4 where the text clarifies that the beast from the sea carries the dragon's power, throne, and "great authority". Because it carries the dragon's power, and because it shares the dragon's aim "to make war on the saints and to conquer them" (13:7, cf. 12:17), the reader is encouraged to see this beast as the dragon's ally and earthly agent. Notably, nowhere in the Apocalypse is the dragon shown to have its own agency in earthly affairs; though the dragon now roams the earth (12:12), it needs to act through a historical agent. The first beast becomes an earthly, historical embodiment of the dragon's cosmic power.⁷ The dragon acts through the first beast to "exercise authority" over the inhabitants of the earth and to "make war" on the saints. David Barr sees, for example, that when the dragon stands on the seashore, it stands there to

⁶ Manuscripts differ on whether it is John or the dragon that stands on the seashore in 12:18, but the dragon appears to be the stronger reading in this "bridge" between visions.

⁷ Walter Wink's analysis of the "spiritual interiority" of the powers is a helpful way to understand the role of the dragon in relation to John's vision of Rome. See Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 104-113.

gather allies in its war against the woman's children.⁸ Similarly, Brian Blount observes that the dragon looks for reinforcement from the sea, and that reinforcement takes the shape of empire.⁹

The vision of the beast originates in Daniel 7. Daniel has a dream about four beasts rising out of the sea. One is like a lion, a second like a bear, a third like a leopard, and a fourth – “terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong” – has ten horns and a mouth that speaks arrogantly (Dan 7:2-7). These four beasts in Daniel's vision are a succession of four world empires or “kingdoms”. The fourth, Daniel notes, is especially terrifying, one who “make[s] war with the holy ones and was prevailing over them,” who “devoured and broke in pieces, and stamped what was left with its feet” (Dan 7:19, 21) – perhaps a reference to the rule of Antiochus IV Epiphanes whose 167 BCE edict and subsequent campaign of persecution precipitated a crisis for the Judean people.¹⁰ John's beast builds on Daniel's vision as a way of “unveiling” the nature of Rome's imperial power.¹¹ But John's beast is not a fifth empire in Daniel's sequence of four. Instead, having ten horns, appearing like a leopard, with feet like a bear, and a mouth like a lion – Daniel's four beasts in reverse order – John's beast is a terrifying synergy of power which combines all four of Daniel's beasts as one. John Yeatts calls it “the sum total of all evil” while Blount uses the image of “imperial force without peer.”¹²

Several layers of meaning reside in the symbol of the sea. That the first beast emerges from the sea probably reflects John's belief that empire has its origins and being in the depths of chaos. Throughout the Apocalypse, as in Hebrew mythology, the sea functions as a dwelling

⁸ David L. Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, 2nd ed. (Salem: Polebridge Press, 2012), 221-2.

⁹ Brian K. Blount, *Revelation*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 243-6.

¹⁰ See Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire*, 176-216.

¹¹ Several options are suggested for the specific identity of beast from the sea, including the empire itself, the emperor, or perhaps the proconsul for Asia Minor who arrives annually by boat (cf. Aune 733). Regardless of the specific historical referent, the beast from the sea represents a projection of centralized power into Asia.

¹² John Yeatts, *Revelation*, BCBC (Waterloo: Herald Press, 2003), 243; also, Blount, *Revelation*, 246.

place of evil, chaos, and death.¹³ In fact, the Apocalypse confuses the sea (13:1) with the abyss (9:2, 11:7) more than once, and it asserts that the sea must pass away with the old order of things (21:1). The sea as a dwelling place for evil and chaos is excluded from the vision of eschatological redemption.¹⁴

John's use of the sea in 13:1, paired with a beast from the earth in 13:11, also suggests that John is invoking the ancient myth of Leviathan and Behemoth. In Hebrew mythology, these two fearsome and destructive creatures were separated at creation and are said to now roam their respective domains, sea and land, until they are slain by God in the last days (Job 41:1ff, Ps 74:14, 4 Ezra 6:49ff).¹⁵ Elsewhere in Hebrew mythology, Leviathan is a symbol for political powers operating in opposition to God (Isa 30:7, 51:9-10, Ezek 29:3-5, Jer 51:34). Empire is, for John, a fearsome beast that is not peace and salvation as Rome was so fond of declaring (see next chapter), but instead the archetypal figure of destruction that has its origins in the depths of chaos.

There is however a third layer of meaning invoked by the sea. Commentators too often miss that the sea figures prominently elsewhere in the Apocalypse as the enabler of large-scale trade in the empire (18:17) and as the foundation of Rome's considerable luxury and wealth (18:19). "Rome dominated the seas, eradicated piracy, and created sea lanes for more efficient and safer travel of people and goods," Blount writes.¹⁶ Among the goods "efficiently traveled" were shipments of grain Rome used to feed its sizeable population. The city itself had grown far

¹³ See Blount, *Revelation*, 245, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 82-3.

¹⁴ I hasten to add that water in the Apocalypse is also a sign of redemption and life. A central feature of the New Jerusalem is a river, "bright as crystal," flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb (22:1-2). Ecologically speaking, the Apocalypse is not anti-water. It is anti-sea, but this because of the sea's mythological rather than natural significance. See e.g. Ched Myers, "Everything will live where the river goes," *Sojourners* (April 2012): 33-35.

¹⁵ Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 732-3. See also Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 185-98.

¹⁶ Blount, *Revelation*, 335.

too large to be self-sufficient and required an estimated six thousand ship arrivals per year to feed its population on grain alone.¹⁷ Beyond this, Rome also received shipments of all manner of luxury goods from its provinces. A list of sea cargo is given in 18:11-13, modeled after Ezekiel's critique of the great seafaring empire of Tyre (Ezek 26-28). The list of cargo is a list of luxury items, culminating in the commoditization of human souls (ψυχὰς ἀνθρώπων).¹⁸ As with Tyre, the prophet of Patmos sees violence and exploitation lurking in this trade on which the imperial project is absolutely contingent. Though Rome is not a coastal city, maritime trade is the seat of her power: elsewhere, she is "seated on many waters" (17:1).

Taking these observations together, we see that John densely packs layer upon layer of traditional and mythological material to re-narrate the world of imperial Rome. John uses these products of a Hebrew prophetic memory to "key" the experience of life in first century Asia Minor to narratives from the cultural memory. The beast itself cannot be easily visualized – it must be *remembered*. We must recall our working hypothesis, to be clarified in a later chapter, that among the *ekklesiai* of Asia Minor not all were in conflict with empire. Many were quite comfortable within the imperial world, and some almost certainly participated in its extensive network of commerce and trade.¹⁹ John provocatively re-visions their world, seeing Rome not as a suitable trade partner, but as worse than the very worst of Daniel's beasts, seated upon the injustices of Tyre, deriving its power from the ambitions of Satan. This reframing forces a reconsideration of one's business with this beast.

¹⁷ Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, 99.

¹⁸ Bauckham sees "human souls" as a clarification of the whole list of goods together. Human souls are commoditized through "the inhuman brutality, the contempt for human life, on which the whole of Rome's prosperity and luxury rests" (*Climax of Prophecy*, 371).

¹⁹ See below; also J. Nelson Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse*, JSNTSup 132 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 90-93.

Before moving on to consider the beast from the earth, we have not yet discussed one curious aspect of the first beast's identity. John sees that one of the seven heads appears to have received a death-blow, but this mortal wound has been healed (13:3). Scholars have puzzled over this, and have arrived at a prevailing theory that the "slaughtered head" probably refers to Nero, who died in 68 CE after being renounced by the senate.²⁰ In particular, scholars see in this symbol the *Nero Redivivus* legend that (i) Nero had not really died and would return from hiding in neighbouring Parthia supported by a vast army, or (ii) Nero would rise from the dead, returning to Rome in glory to retake his throne.

What is important for our purposes is not whether a particular Nero legend stands behind the image of the wounded head, but how the image functions within the story. First, the wounded head is not an incidental detail. This theme is thrice repeated (13:3, 13:12, 13:14) and becomes the primary moniker for the beast in the last two occurrences. Second, the language applied to the beast from the sea – literally, "as slaughtered into death" (13:3: ὡς ἐσφαγμένην εἰς θάνατον) – mirrors emphatically the language applied to the Lamb who is himself "slaughtered" (5:6: ὡς ἐσφαγμένην; 13:8: τοῦ ἀρνίου τοῦ ἐσφαγμένου). Both Lamb and beast are slaughtered. Both Lamb and beast live (ἐζήσεν: 13:14, 2:8). Third, the question raised by the beast's worshippers, "who is like the beast?" (13:4), echoes phrasing elsewhere used to worship God (Ps 35:10).

A picture emerges of rivalry between the two characters. We should probably keep in mind at this point Rome's rhetoric of having brought peace and salvation, a "golden age," to the Mediterranean world. Rome proclaimed itself to be a saviour. Joining with Rome can assure one's security (13:15) and preserve one's economic future (13:17). But John sees that empire is a false saviour, a dangerous parody of the messiahship of the Lamb (see the emphatic claim in

²⁰ On the Nero legends and interpretation, see Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 737-40; also, Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 407-31.

7:10 that salvation belongs to God, and by implication to no one else).²¹ There is danger that one can look upon empire and see salvation where there is blasphemy, a lamb where there is really a beast. Thus Lamb and Beast are locked in conflict with one another. They are two alternative visions for the world; two opposing offers of salvation. It becomes an open question in the Apocalypse whether the listening community has “eyes to see” the difference between the Lamb’s salvation and the beast’s deceptive overtures.

Another beast rose out of the earth

The dragon standing on the seashore calls forth a second ally, this one from the earth. This second beast *looks* like a lamb and *speaks* like a dragon, suggesting that it is deputized in service of the dragon while appearing to have a beneficent purpose. Elsewhere this beast is called a “false prophet” (16:13, 19:20, 20:10). Some have suggested that John may have in mind a saying of Jesus, “beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matt 7:15), the point being that false prophets can trip up disciples of the Lamb. In contrast with the vivid visual descriptions of the first beast, these two details – looks like a lamb, speaks like a dragon – are all that is given to visualize the second beast. This second beast is largely described by its activities.

That this beast “makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast” (13:12) suggests that it is related in some way to the imperial cults.²² As with the first beast, the specific historical referent is unclear. Scholars have postulated that John might have had in mind the provincial governor, the imperial priesthood, the *koinon* of Asia, the local elite, or perhaps all of

²¹ Bauckham summarizes our point: “[John] saw certain definite features of the empire as constituting a divine and messianic claim that rivaled Christ’s” (*Climax of Prophecy*, 440).

²² On the pluralization of *cults* (a multiform rather than uniform reality), see the next chapter. It is also important to recognize in discussing “the imperial cults” that there were many cults and associations in antiquity, not all of which were directly related to the emperor. See Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

the above.²³ It is quite probable in my view that John is not being too precise about a specific historical referent, but is describing a broad phenomenon whereby local inhabitants came to follow the first beast (empire) because of the activities of the second.

That the beast rises “out of the earth” suggests that it should be understood as a local authority, in contrast to foreign authority that originates from the sea.²⁴ We know that in the first century participation in the imperial cults was not mandated from above by the emperor. While the emperor certainly had a hand in shaping certain aspects of the cults (the construction of provincial temples in particular),²⁵ mostly the cults were local undertakings, an expression of gratitude and loyalty that spontaneously rose up from among local elites who also funded the enterprise.²⁶ Moreover, the cults took up many local practices and customs, and reworked them into a discourse of support for the emperor.²⁷ Interpreters have seen that imperial cults originate as indigenous institutions that rise up from the soil of Asia Minor, “out of the earth” as it were.

David Barr offers a broader interpretation for the second beast, which includes but is not limited to the imperial cults. He suggests that the beast should be seen as “the system of institutions, individuals, and ethos that supports the domination system of Rome, especially the local elite who sponsored the games, sacrifices, and public performances of the Imperial Cult.”²⁸ This suggestion of a broader system is compelling because it forges a link to Gramsci’s work on political power from our first chapter. It suggests that while the first beast is the coercive, conquering power of Rome (domination), the second is its seductive, world-ordering power

²³ For a full list of options, see Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 756.

²⁴ Barr, *Tales*, 224; Blount, *Revelation*, 257; Yeatts, *Revelation*, 247.

²⁵ The process of establishing a provincial temple involved local initiative, senate deliberation, and assent by the emperor. See Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 38.

²⁶ Kraybill, *Imperial Cult*, 60-61.

²⁷ A study of the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias shows the emperor was incorporated into local deities and customs. For example Aphrodite – the city’s main deity – stands in place of Venus as mother of the Sebastoi (Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 77-95).

²⁸ Barr, *Tales*, 224.

(hegemony).²⁹ Barr's reading also accounts for a fuller range of the beast's activities, which include cult (worship), spectacle (great signs), and media (images), backed by economic institutions. I offer a few observations in support of this reading:

It makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast. Imperial cults, Steven Friesen notices, were ubiquitous in Asia Minor. "Emperors were worshipped in their own temples, and temples of other gods, in theaters, in gymnasia, in stoas, in basilicas, in judicial settings, in private homes, and elsewhere. Imperial cults were everywhere."³⁰ These prolific cults were not a minor "religious" problem for John. They represented something far more dangerous.

One, the ubiquity of these cults meant that worship belonging to God was offered to others instead. This is no small issue for someone like John who is so deeply influenced by Jewish thought patterns, where worship is no rote ritual but a matter of engaging heart, soul, and strength (Deut 6:5). Worship in these cults points to a fundamental disruption in the right ordering of human affairs: God who rightly governs the world is overlooked, while humanity tries to invoke meaningless idols that "cannot either see or hear or walk" (9:20).

Two, S.R.F. Price has investigated the role of imperial cults in first century Asia Minor. His landmark 1984 study famously formulated that these cults function as "a major part of the web of power that formed the fabric of society."³¹ For Price, it is not enough to say that these cults *legitimized* the power of the emperor – though that in itself certainly happened. Instead, a

²⁹ Friesen supports linking the second beast to hegemony, though he limits his discussion to the function of the imperial cults. "Imperial cults are portrayed as deception, a blasphemous lie, one crucial aspect in the Roman practice of dominating and exploiting the world. As such, imperial cults are presented as a crucial aspect of demonic Roman hegemony" (*Imperial Cults*, 147).

³⁰ Steven J. Friesen, "Satan's Throne, Imperial Cults and Revelation," *JSNT* 27.3 (2005), 363.

³¹ S.R.F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 248. See also Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 4.

fuller analysis of cult rituals demonstrates that these rituals *actively constructed* relationships of power in Roman imperial society, particularly in the provinces.³²

Imperial cults, in other words, are not mundane religious rites that are largely innocuous. They are deeply symbolic, expressing a particular story about the world. They make present the *charisma* of the emperor in places far removed from the imperial centre and express the emperor's unique role as among human beings and the gods. Again, Price writes, "The system of ritual was carefully structured; the symbolism evoked a picture of the relationship between the emperor and the gods. The ritual was also structuring; it imposed a definition of the world."³³ I explore some specifics about the imperial cults in a later chapter; for the moment, it is enough to note that imperial cults were ubiquitous, and these cults were intricately involved in constructing the power that underlies the imperial project.

It performs great signs. The example of fire falling from heaven in the sight of all (13:13) recalls Elijah's sign of fire (1 Kgs 18:38, 2 Kgs 1:10). Some have tried to understand this sign quite literally and have identified cult performances in the first century that employed "sophisticated technology" to simulate thunder and lighting.³⁴ While this may be a plausible reading, the Apocalypse rarely uses symbols so directly. I am not convinced that John had in mind actual performances of technological "magic," but am more inclined to see with Howard-Brook and Gwyther a program of imperial propaganda, a "highly organized, technologically proficient, and psychologically effective process of developing a systematic, false reality that masquerades as 'the way things are.'"³⁵

³² Price, *Rituals*, 235.

³³ Price, *Rituals*, 248.

³⁴ e.g. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, 85-6.

³⁵ Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling*, 216.

It could very well be that John has in mind neither magic nor miracle but *spectacle*, including imperial games, festivals, and other elaborate productions that create a sense of awe and wonder at the kind of world that Rome has made possible, and perhaps also distract from the realities of violence and lack of justice that John seeks to make visible.³⁶ Just as Elijah's sign of fire materializes in a contest to demonstrate whose god has real power (Baal or YHWH), the spectacle is a demonstration of the beast's great power to structure the world. John himself gets caught up in the power of the spectacle at one point, standing astonished at Rome (17:6-7). An angel helps him take a step back and regain perspective about the nature of the beast that fills him with wonder. This episode demonstrates the beast's ability to evoke awe and wonder among the inhabitants of the earth, among even its most virulent critics.

It makes an image. The dominant media of the Roman world included temples, monuments, inscriptions, and coins. Price in his extensive study of imperial monuments identifies three major categories,³⁷ which were found not only in imperial temples but also throughout civic space: (1) cuirassed statues, depicting the emperor as warrior; (2) naked statues, which evoke the traditional representations of the gods; and (3) statues of the emperor as lead citizen, wearing a Roman toga. Price finds that these monuments were an important focal point in various ceremonial contexts,³⁸ and helped to construct imperial ideology: "Imperial images are not merely illustrations of ideology, they partly constitute it. Their iconography articulated different aspects of imperial rule, the civilian, military, and the divine."³⁹ Further, such images helped disseminate the charisma of the emperor throughout cities on the periphery. Like imperial

³⁶ cf. Barr, *Tales*, 224.

³⁷ Price, *Rituals*, 181-8.

³⁸ Price, *Rituals*, 190.

³⁹ Price, *Rituals*, 205.

cults, these monuments made the emperor personally known and present in cities of Asia where he had little personal presence.

It causes all to be marked on the right hand or the forehead. One cannot buy or sell without receiving the mark of the beast. This suggests that in John's social analysis, economic institutions are aligned hegemonically with Rome. It is impossible to realize economic opportunity, indeed to participate in "basic and essential economic activity,"⁴⁰ without participating in some way in the broader program of empire. Those who refuse the mark of the beast risk destitution.

Several possibilities have been suggested to understand what 'mark' John has in mind. These have included the use of coins that bear the emperor's image,⁴¹ participation in trade guilds and associations which inevitably entailed cultic ritual,⁴² and the fact that imperial temples also served as financial centres.⁴³ Perhaps the mark refers to the reality that because of the prolific presence of the cults, "literally every [civic] activity would involve one in some token recognition of the emperor and of the gods" – including education, medicine, sporting events, theatre, and commercial relationships.⁴⁴

While I find all these possibilities to be credible, I also find a compelling connection to Deut 6:4-9. "Hear, O Israel: YHWH is our God, YHWH alone." This imperative, the great Sh'ma, is given in Deuteronomy just prior to entry into the land. It speaks to a concern that Israel, upon entering the land, and, finding there all kinds of abundance, will forget YHWH who brought them there. Deut 6 warns that comfort can lead to amnesia, amnesia to compromise, and

⁴⁰ Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 768.

⁴¹ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, 86; Blount, *Revelation*, 260.

⁴² Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 768, Blount, *Revelation*, 260.

⁴³ Howard-Brook and Gwyther cite the temple of Artemis (Ephesus) as an example, which served as the financial headquarters for Asia. "Anyone who wished to buy or sell, borrow or lend was compelled to cooperate with the temple" (*Unveiling*, 104).

⁴⁴ Barr, *Tales*, 222-3.

compromise to a loss of identity as God's holy people. The antidote to this loss of identity is a strong memory. The text urges its hearers towards mnemonic practices that frame every part of life – “keep these words”, “recite them at home and away, lying down and rising up”, “bind them on your hand”, “fix them on your forehead”, “write them on doorposts and gates” (Deut 6:6-9). These disciplines of memory preserve God's people from forgetting who they are, and from forgetting YHWH who “brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand” (6:21), and from turning to other gods. The mark on the forehead and the mark on the hand features prominently in Deuteronomy as a reminder of holiness.

Does the beast seek to co-opt the memory of God's people by writing on their hand and forehead a different name, its own? Can the mark of the beast be read against the background of a hegemonic agenda to absorb the particular and peculiar identity of God's people into the project of empire, binding their identity and allegiance not to YHWH but to the beast? There is a compelling imaginative possibility here.⁴⁵ The Apocalypse shares many concerns with Deut 6, including the risk of amnesia (2:5, 3:3) and compromise (2:14-15, 2:20, 3:4), and the concern in our present text with idolatry and worship of the beast. I am tempted to conclude that through the activities of the second beast – cult, spectacle, and media – participants in the ordinary affairs of civic life are marked in such a way that their identity and allegiance becomes bound to empire.

The second beast completes John's social analysis by explaining how the first beast has gathered its following. Cult, spectacle, media, and economic institutions each play a role in constructing and reinforcing Rome's hegemony, a world-order where empire is a fact of life.

What is truly alarming about this false prophet is that through its activities, it “gives breath

⁴⁵ Portier-Young traces how Jewish identity was assimilated into Hellenistic thought patterns during the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes: “His edict aimed to replace Judean identity, history, and social memory with a new ground of being and belonging...with Antiochus the authorizer and maker of a new world, order, and identity for the inhabitants of Judea” (*Apocalypse*, 215). Two hundred years later, it seems that Rome is up to a similar project among its subjects in Asia Minor, although using very different strategies.

(πνεῦμα) to the image of the beast” (13:15). Recalling the πνεῦμα of God in Gen 2:7, the role of the second beast is to breathe life into the power of empire, just as God breathes life into the earthling formed of the dust of the ground. Thus the second beast makes alive Rome’s power and agency to command the obedience of the nations: its cults, media, and spectacle animate and enliven empire’s power at a local level.

John sees, therefore, in this collaboration of beasts an “unholy trinity” of power. Dragon, sea-beast, and earth-beast each stand behind, as, and in support of the imperial project. They are the creators of an unholy world in which the people of God find no easy home. John may not have had access to Peter Berger or to Antonio Gramsci, but the sophistication of his social analysis runs equally deep. The prophet of Patmos names this dual face of power (domination and hegemony) as intrinsic to the art of empire.

II. The Alternative Community of the Lamb (14:1-5)

The next stop on our tour of the political geography of the Apocalypse is Mount Zion, where the Lamb stands with 144,000 followers.⁴⁶ This vision is clearly antithetical to the vision of the first beast and its followers: (1) the Lamb stands on Mount Zion while the first beast stands on the sea; (2) the 144,000 are marked on the forehead with the name of God and the Lamb, while the beast’s followers are marked by the beast on the forehead and right hand; (3) the 144,000 follow the Lamb, while the whole earth follows the beast; (4) in their mouth, no lie was found, in contrast with the beast’s blasphemy and deception; and (5) these 144,000 are able to learn a “new song” that no one else can learn – not, in particular, the tribes, people, languages, and nations who follow the first beast. In contrast to John’s characterization of “the whole earth”,

⁴⁶ For detailed discussion on 14:1-5, I commend David E. Aune, “Following the Lamb: Discipleship in the Apocalypse,” in *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 269-84; also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Followers of the Lamb: Visionary Rhetoric and Social-Political Situation,” *Semeia* 36 (1986): 123-46.

“all the inhabitants of the earth”, and “every tribe and people and language and nation”, all disciples of empire, we have here what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza calls “the alternative community of the Lamb.”⁴⁷

The setting for this vision – the Lamb standing on Mount Zion – is one of holy war, continuing the combat motif of Rev 12. That setting is most clearly expressed in Psalm 2, where the presence of YHWH’s king on Mount Zion serves warning that the kings of the earth should fear and serve God, else God’s judgment will be delivered quickly through this messianic agent. 4 Ezra 13:25-50 expresses similar hopes: when God’s messianic agent is revealed, all the nations will gather to make war against him. But he will stand on Mount Zion, and he will conquer them in the most remarkable way, “without effort by means of the law” (4 Ezra 13:38), much like the Lamb conquers with a sword issuing from his mouth (Rev 19:15). We revisit this motif of holy war in a later chapter.

But the focus of 14:1-5 is not the Lamb, though he is vital. The focus is the “alternative community” that has gathered. In what sense is this community alternative? Three characteristics are given in 14:4, each introduced with the phrase “[it is] these” (οὗτοί [εἰσιν]).

It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. This clause has attracted much attention because of its obvious misogyny, and therefore deserves careful reading. Tina Pippin on the basis of verses like this one has argued that the Apocalypse is not good for women. She has seen that at the narrative level, female characters of the Apocalypse are passive, sexualized, and controlled; they are objects of desire which are often violated.⁴⁸ Further, she sees that verses like this one at 14:4 betray a deep misogyny at work in John’s mind. While

⁴⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, 87.

⁴⁸ See for example Tina Pippin, “The Heroine and the Whore: The Apocalypse of John in Feminist Perspective,” in *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective*, ed. David Rhoads (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 127-145. See also her *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992).

Pippin has trouble finding a “liberating” reading of the Apocalypse, other scholars also attentive to feminist hermeneutics are a little more forgiving of the text. While lamenting the genderized symbols, Schüssler Fiorenza is able to employ a hermeneutic that sees female characters not as real women, but as symbols that can be read carefully for their symbolic meaning once gender is not seen as a code for real persons.⁴⁹ Whether the Apocalypse can be liberating for women is not an issue we can resolve here, but the importance of the question must be noted, particularly in the present context of considering one of the most misogynist verses of the text.⁵⁰ It is a question that resists an easy resolution.

If we allow Schüssler Fiorenza’s reading strategy to stand, looking behind gender for other symbolic meaning, we find some compelling connections. The Apostle Paul uses “defile” (μολύνω) in connection with idolatry (1 Cor 8:7) and it is likely that the Apocalypse has this in mind when it speaks of those at Sardis who “have not defiled their garments” (3:4). There is a long history of Hebrew texts that use sexual infidelity as a metaphor for turning from true worship of YHWH to worship other gods instead.⁵¹ Additionally, in Proverbs, adultery signifies being seduced from the path of Wisdom (Prov 7), who is herself personified as an active, noble, and empowered woman who guides the young away from other seductions towards righteousness. This is likely what is in view here. The 144,000 are those who have not defiled themselves by worshipping the first beast or by participating in the imperial cults. They are non-participants with the idols and seductions of empire. This stance of non-participation is confirmed by the fact that they have not received the beast’s mark on their foreheads.

⁴⁹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Power of the Word*, 130-37, 140-47.

⁵⁰ For yet another perspective on this issue, see David L. Barr, “Towards an Ethical Reading of the Apocalypse: Reflections on John’s Use of Power, Violence, and Misogyny,” *Society of Biblical Literature 1997 Seminar Papers* 36 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 358-73.

⁵¹ Aune (*Revelation 6-16*, 812) cites as examples Jer 3:2, 13:27, Ezek 16:15-58, 23:1-49, 43:7, Hos 5:4, 6:10. See also Schüssler Fiorenza, “Followers of the Lamb,” 132-33.

This reading of 14:1-5 is supported elsewhere in the Apocalypse if we follow the related language of “fornication” (πορνεία). In 2:14 and 2:20, fornication is linked explicitly to idolatry. Later, in 17:2, 18:3, and 18:9, it is linked to “the great harlot seated on many waters.” Another deeply misogynistic image, the great harlot here is not a real woman, but a symbol for Rome, as made clear by her moniker “Babylon the great” (17:5). Sexual impropriety is symbolic of becoming entangled in the business of empire.

It is also quite possible, picking up on the holy war motif, that celibacy is related to the temporary sexual abstinence required for participants in holy war (1 Sam 21:4-5, 1QM 7:3-7).⁵² In Qumran’s War Scroll, for example, the Essenes saw ritual purity as important preparation for the kind of war where God and his angels accompany the armies (1QM 7:6). Purity is paramount if God is to go with you, therefore a warrior who is not ritually clean must cease fighting and return to the camp. We are talking here not of defilement that is caused by women in particular, but about ritual impurity that results from sexual activity involving men and women *together* (cf. Lev 15:16-18). If this is the case, then the 144,000 are not only non-participants in the project of empire: they are also an army gathered to participate in the Lamb’s peculiar war against the beast.

No part of this discussion dismisses Pippin’s concern that the Apocalypse means death for women. There is symbolic meaning “behind” the text where women characters are not real women. I believe this to be a faithful reading of the text. But there is also the story-world in front of the reader where, before symbols are “degenderized,” women characters are violated while “undefiled” men are celebrated. Regardless of the possibility of a hermeneutic that looks beyond

⁵² Aune, “Following the Lamb,” 274.

gender for symbolic meanings, the storytelling which sees its female characters as “objects of desire” and anticipates their destruction ought to give us pause.⁵³

These follow the Lamb wherever he goes. The verb here “to follow” (ἀκολουθεῖω) occurs primarily in the gospels and means “to go behind” and “to accompany”, but commonly carries the figurative meaning “to be a disciple of.”⁵⁴ We have here, as in 13:3, discipleship language. That these disciples follow the Lamb “wherever he goes” appears to be a common saying that speaks to cutting ties with old allegiances to become an adherent of Jesus’ movement (Lk 9:57-58, Mt 8:19-20). The saying probably includes following the Lamb into slaughter, since this is the road the Lamb takes to victory. It certainly also includes “keep[ing] the commandments of God and the faith[fulness] of Jesus” (14:12).⁵⁵ Thus the 144,000 are disciples of the Lamb who stand in contrast to the disciples of empire. They have staked out an alternative identity, one that is based not in conformity, but in companionship with the Lamb and obedience to God.

It is worth noting that the disciples of the beast have not necessarily made an explicit decision about their allegiance. The second beast works in such a way that one can become captive to the beast in the regular course of civic and economic life. The 144,000 who are disciples of the Lamb have therefore made radical choices of non-participation in a world where imperial cult and media is ubiquitous. They exhibit profound moral imagination. John anticipates this discipleship is a costly choice, and it is an allegiance that has no doubt touched every part of their lives.

⁵³ I agree here with Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld’s assessment that with regards to violence, gendered or otherwise, CAVEAT LECTOR (reader beware!) ought to be stamped all over the Apocalypse. See his *Killing Enmity: Violence and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 133-35.

⁵⁴ Aune, “Following the Lamb”, 275.

⁵⁵ David Aune has seen that what is probably meant by “keeping the commandments of God” is Torah obedience, relating specifically to the ethical (as opposed to the ceremonial) commands of Torah. “There is no dichotomy here between law and grace – a Pauline theological problem that is remarkably absent from the Johannine Apocalypse. Rather, obedience to the will of God as mediated by the Torah is considered complementary to the demands of faith in Christ” (“Following the Lamb,” 279-83).

These have been redeemed from humankind as first fruits. This last οὗτοι clause draws on sacrificial imagery. The 144,000 are a remnant community whose alternative life-practice is “the perfect offering and gift for God.”⁵⁶ They stand in contrast to those marked by the beast who are under God’s judgment (14:9-11). But with the image of the first fruits, there is also a sense that the first of the harvest “redeems” the remainder (Rom 11:16). Though the present may be bleak, though the beast has succeeded in seducing “all the inhabitants of the earth,” more are yet to be redeemed.⁵⁷ This is the goal to which the “alternative” identity of the 144,000 seems to drive. Though the beast has captivated many, the kingdom of this world will be transformed into the kingdom of God (11:15). The Lamb’s victory does not whisk away the remnant only to abandon the inhabitants of the earth. It seeks through the remnant to win as many as possible.⁵⁸ Bauckham writes, “the sacrificial death of the Lamb and the prophetic witness of his followers are God’s strategy for winning all the nations of the world from the dominion of the beast to his own kingdom.”⁵⁹

In sum, the community is “alternative” in the sense that these are non-participants with the idols of empire. These people stake out an identity and life-practice as disciples and companions of the Lamb, and they participate in God’s strategy to win the nations from captivity to the beast. When the question is raised in 13:4 “who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?” we have already seen that this question parodies the worship of YHWH. But it is also rhetorical, something worshippers of the beast would surely miss. Who can fight against the beast? It is of course the Lamb with his 144,000 companions. They fight with their resistance and

⁵⁶ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, 88.

⁵⁷ Blount, *Revelation*, 270.

⁵⁸ Critics of the Apocalypse’s virulent us-against-them dualism have missed this fundamental point: John’s vision is one where the Lamb wins the nations. It is an inclusive, perhaps universal, vision of salvation: but one that is also unapologetic in its ethical demands. Those who are “out” (the nations) are being brought in, even while those who think they are “in” (the *ekklesiai*) ought not be so self-assured. See Bauckham, “Conversion of the Nations,” in *Climax of Prophecy*, 238-337.

⁵⁹ Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 337.

their alternative life-practice, and through their trust that vulnerability, even to the point of slaughter, will be made right by God. John embeds right within his portrait of totalizing power the possibility of a community that will oppose it.

III. Resistance and Witness

A consistent mark of discipleship in the Apocalypse is the so-called “patient endurance” or “consistent resistance” (ὑπομονή) of the holy ones.⁶⁰ This language has been variously understood, and will recur frequently within this study, so it is necessary to discuss the nature of the resistance that is called for.

To get at this question, Adela Yarbro Collins has studied Jewish resistance literature emerging from the Maccabean period.⁶¹ She identifies two models of resistance in the literature: *revolution* and *passive resistance*.⁶² *Revolution* is modeled in the successful Maccabean revolt against the Seleucids: here, holy war traditions serve as ideology that stirs up violent revolt, with the faithful taking direct militant action against the oppressive power. The Zealots, Collins sees, carried this militant tradition during the Roman era. *Passive resistance*, on the other hand, rejects the militant option. The passive option refuses participation in that which contradicts Jewish law or tradition, but does not take initiative in any other way. Two subtypes can be discerned. The first, demonstrated by the book of Daniel, calls for a stance of enduring and waiting. The faithful trust that God will overthrow the enemy, and they wait. They have no role to play in the battle. The second subtype, demonstrated by the Assumption of Moses, is like the first but the faithful are seen to participate in God’s victory through their righteous suffering. God avenges the death

⁶⁰ ὑπομονή is also a common ethical imperative in the seven messages, as well as Rev 13-14. In all, it occurs at 1:9, 2:2, 2:3, 2:19, 3:10, 13:10, and 14:12. The translation “consistent resistance” is preferred over “patience” by Schüssler Fiorenza (*Justice*, 4, 191) and others.

⁶¹ Adela Yarbro Collins, “The Political Perspective of the Revelation to John,” *JBL* 96 (1977): 241-56.

⁶² Collins, “Political Perspective,” 242-45.

of the righteous person. In this way, righteous suffering contributes to victory as it stokes the fires of God's vengeance.

Collins believes that the call for resistance in the Apocalypse is of this second passive type. She finds in 13:10 an explicit rejection of the militant option, and encouragement elsewhere that suffering will help "complete" the required count of martyrs and bring about God's day of vengeance:

The readers are not to take up arms in active resistance, not even in the final battle. Rather they are to endure persecution including death and to hope for ultimate salvation. A certain synergism is possible according to Rev 6:9-11. The death of each martyr brings the eschaton nearer.⁶³

While Collins is correct to see a rejection of the militant option, it is not clear that passivity is the only option that remains. Is there a third model of resistance in the Apocalypse, one that is neither violent revolt nor "endure and wait" passivity?

Brian Blount thinks so. Reading from the Black Church tradition and the civil rights movement, he connects *ὑπομονή* through the language of witness to a practice of active nonviolent resistance.⁶⁴ The point is not to wait and endure, but to actively speak truth to power, however unwelcome the message may be. "Revelation craves witness as engaged, resistant, transformative activism," he writes. Such activism, exemplified in the nonviolent campaigns for civil rights, must be "willing to sacrifice everything in an effort to make the world over into a reality that responds to and operates from Jesus' role as ruler and saviour of all."⁶⁵ The prophet of Patmos, Blount thinks, is telling his people to go out and pick a fight.⁶⁶

⁶³ Collins, "Political Perspective," 251-52.

⁶⁴ Brian K. Blount, *Can I Get a Witness? Reading Revelation through African American Culture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 37-67; see also his *Revelation*, 41-42, 255.

⁶⁵ Blount, *Can I Get a Witness?*, 38.

⁶⁶ Blount, *Revelation*, 41.

Loren Johns comes to a similar conclusion.⁶⁷ He highlights the two “faithful witnesses” Jesus (1:5, 3:14) and Antipas (2:13). Both are slaughtered because of their witness. Further, we have the souls under the altar slain “on account of the word of God and for the witness (τὴν μαρτυρίαν) they had borne” (6:9); the “brethren” who conquered the dragon “by the word of their testimony (τὸν λόγον τῆς μαρτυρίας), for they loved not their lives even unto death” (12:11); and “the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony (τὴν μαρτυρίαν) to Jesus and for the word of God” (20:4). The Apocalypse anticipates death as a likely outcome of engaged and faithful witness. Yet unlike the Assumption of Moses, death is not the primary way the faithful participate in the Lamb’s war. They participate not through a passive acceptance of suffering, but through active and engaged witness. Death is one possible, even likely, outcome of that witness. But witness, not death, is the primary action demanded.

This is all made clear by John’s example, who “bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ” (1:2), and who is on Patmos “on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:9), yet has not been killed. The two witnesses of 11:3-13 (τοῖς δυσὶν μάρτυσίν μου) likewise witness *prior* to their death – the beast rises up to kill them only *after* they have “finished their testimony (τὴν μαρτυρίαν αὐτῶν)” (11:7). “The ‘witness’ envisioned in the Apocalypse is not just a ‘passive acceptance of suffering,’ as Adela Yarbro Collins has maintained, but rather the sort of nonviolent resistance to evil in which both Jesus and John engaged.”⁶⁸

Johns concludes that the Apocalypse is not designed to make the listening community passive. It is instead a vision designed “to empower the community to enter the fray with a

⁶⁷ Loren L. Johns, *The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John*, WUNT 2/167 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 172-75.

⁶⁸ Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 173-74.

courageous nonviolent resistance that may well lead to martyrdom.”⁶⁹ From my perspective, this understanding best articulates the meaning of ὑπομονή as it is used in the Apocalypse.

Resistance is not only a “no” to participation in the business of empire: it is, as we have seen, to stake out an alternative practice and speak an alternative word, following in the footsteps of what we will later call the “cloud of witnesses.”⁷⁰ The translation of ὑπομονή as “patient endurance” will not do at all then: we will prefer “consistent nonviolent resistance.”

IV. Standing in Storied Places

Through the visions of 12:18-14:5, John has woven images of parody, contest, and holy war, transforming the world of the listening community through evocative and provocative symbols. Empire and Lamb are locked in conflict with one another, a conflict that is cosmic in scope and fought on the grounds of discourse and ideology. But the conflict ultimately focuses down to a question of identity and discipleship: Where does the listening community stand in this geography? Whom will they follow? On what place will they stake their lives?

Within this vision, Mount Zion stands as a symbolic location, the rightful place of the alternative community of the Lamb. It is not that the Apocalypse wishes that its hearers uproot from Asia Minor and relocate to Jerusalem. Rather, Mount Zion indicates a place that is symbolically separate from, yet practically rooted in, earthly affairs. As we have seen, the moniker “inhabitants of the earth” (13:8) indicates settling in and making a place for oneself within the imperial world. Mount Zion, on the other hand, is a place that stands over and against the kings of the earth including the beast. As M. Eugene Boring has seen, the call to join the 144,000 on Mount Zion is “not a matter of geographical relocation but of inner reorientation.”⁷¹ It indicates a place where one stakes out a place among the alternative community of the Lamb,

⁶⁹ Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 205.

⁷⁰ On the active nature of discipleship in the Apocalypse, see Aune, “Following the Lamb.”

⁷¹ M.E. Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 189.

even while walking the streets of Asia Minor. It is also a vision of holiness, being “set apart” from the nations who worship the beast. On Mount Zion, the companions of the Lamb form a community of resistance and hope.

It strikes me that each symbolic location in this political geography is a *storied* place, a place of *memory* – the earth with the mythologies of empire, and Mount Zion with the mythologies of Hebrew folklore. Our next two chapters give attention to the stories that shape each place.

Chapter 3: ‘Giving Breath to the Image of the Beast’ Memory in Myth, Media, and Ritual

In the previous chapter, I suggested that John’s vision of two beasts represents the various instruments of domination and hegemony at work in Roman Asia Minor. In particular, the beast from the earth offers a suggestive triad of media, cult, and spectacle, which together “enliven” or “construct” the empire’s power at a local level. Bringing this triad into dialogue with memory analysis, we are led to ask, “what (if any) narratives are at work through these mechanisms?” and “how are these narratives made present through cultural products and processes?”

By all accounts, memory formed an important part of first-century Roman culture. Karl Galinsky goes so far as to say that “memory defined Roman civilization,”¹ while Alain Gowing writes, “Romans attached a heightened importance to memory, which manifests itself in almost every part of their existence, from celebrations of the dead to oratory to law, suffusing and animating their art, their buildings, and their literature.”² This memorial culture ranged from erecting monuments and writing inscriptions to commemorate exemplary citizens (often the elite male),³ to writing histories on a broad scale (e.g. Livy), to mythic discourses that created a common sense of the past that could be shared across a vast empire (e.g. Ovid, Virgil).⁴ Memory could be transmitted through monument, text, and ritual, often all three together, so that it was “visible and legible, but also dramatic and able to be recreated.”⁵

¹ Karl Galinsky, ed., *Memoria Romana: Memory in Rome and Rome in Memory* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 1.

² Alain M. Gowing, *Empire and Memory: the representation of the Roman Republic in imperial culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2.

³ Flower, *Art of Forgetting*, 276.

⁴ Louise Revell, *Roman Imperialism and Local Identities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 107.

⁵ Flower, *Art of Forgetting*, 276.

The present chapter reviews one particular strand of memory that weaves its way through the first century Roman *polis*: the Augustan myth.⁶ When I speak of “myth,” I do not intend the pejorative sense of being “made up” or “untrue.” Rather, I use “myth” in the sense of Fentress and Wickham: “Myths [...] are nothing but genres in which social memory is retained and transmitted.”⁷ It is clear that the early empire was intensely involved in projects of “myth-making” that forged a connection between members of the empire and also between the empire and its past. The Augustan myth expresses a particular understanding of history and of the empire’s foundations. It is not surprising, given the nature of Roman memorial culture, that we find this myth reflected in text, monument, and ritual. These form together a complex “web of significance” that draws ordinary people into an encounter with the empire’s mythic discourse and encourages participation in it.

I. Augustan Myth

By the time John pens the Apocalypse near the end of the first century, he finds himself at the height of the *Pax Romana* that had been inaugurated by Augustus just a century earlier.⁸ This was a moment charged with significance for Rome and indeed the entire Mediterranean world. Prior to Augustus, Rome had long functioned as a republic, but was tossed into political turmoil for the better part of the last century BCE. During these years, Roman fought Roman, and powerful generals sporadically emerged to settle things down and rule for a time, providing some peace but breaking the long-treasured republican tradition that no one individual be vested

⁶ I am well aware that “mythic discourse” in the empire was a broad and complex phenomenon, including not only the empire’s myths but also myths about so-called “pagan” gods (Isis, Cybele, etc.), and these mythic strands weaved into one another. My aim here is not to account for the wide diversity, all of which forms an important part of Roman memorial culture, but to focus on a main strand that weaved its way to the center of imperial power.

⁷ Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, 81.

⁸ On Augustus’ rise to power, see N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 285-9; also Karl Galinsky, *Augustus: Introduction to the Life of an Emperor* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 61-83.

with too much political power. These years of political turmoil “frayed the psyche of the nation”⁹ and threatened the deepest ideals of the republic.

Augustus rose to power after the assassination of his adopted father Julius Caesar in 44 BCE. Initially after the assassination, power was shared between Octavian (Augustus), Antony, and Lepidus, the group of three being known as the second triumvirate. But over a decade that arrangement frayed. Lepidus was sidelined first, then Octavian and Antony met in battle at Actium in 31 BCE. Octavian defeated Antony, emerging as the undisputed leader of Rome.

Greeted upon his return to Rome by a war-weary populace, Octavian ordered shut the doors to the Temple of Janus and held celebrations for his victories at Actium and at Alexandria, where Antony had fled. Shutting the Temple of Janus was an enormously symbolic action: after years of civil turmoil, the action declared that peace and stability had finally returned to the Mediterranean world, to an exhausted and shattered people. With the closing of Janus’ doors, the *Pax Romana* had been inaugurated: the long sought peace and stability had at last arrived, a “peace secured by victories” as the *Res Gestae* would put it.¹⁰

For these glad tidings, the name Augustus (exalted one) was conferred upon Octavian. With the blessing of the senate, he adopted for himself the title *princeps* (first citizen), and over time acquired a broad range of constitutional powers. Augustus carefully characterized this period as “restoring” the republic. Nevertheless, the idea of “emperor” once so abhorrent to republican sensibilities – a single ruler yielding vast political influence – was consolidated and institutionalized under Augustus. Thus began a new era in Rome, an age of peace under the watchful *auctoritas* of *Imperator Caesar Divi Filius Augustus*.

⁹ Galinsky, *Augustus*, 85.

¹⁰ Augustus, *Res Gestae* 2.13.

N.T. Wright, reflecting on the implications of this moment, writes: “in the beginning the empire used every available means in art, architecture, literature and culture in general – everything from tiny coins to the rebuilding of entire city centres – to communicate to the Roman people near and far the message that Augustus’ rise to power was the great new moment for which Rome, and indeed the whole world, had been waiting.”¹¹ Wright may slightly overstate the case: as often as not, the tenor of Augustan discourse focused on working *towards* that climactic goal rather than having already achieved it.¹² Nevertheless, the rise of Augustus and the achievement of the *Pax Romana* marks a significant focal point in Rome’s memory. We cannot possibly review all the evidence in this section, but a few examples help illustrate the point.

Augustan Myth in Horace

A reasonable place to begin is with Horace’s *Carmen Saeculare*. This “Hymn for a New Age” was written for the occasion of the Secular Games held by Augustus in 17 BCE.¹³ “Secular” derives here from *saeculum*, and suggests a festival marking an “age” or “cycle” of time. The festival was one of many symbolic ways Augustus marked the “new age” he had founded.

Augustus’ particular version of the festival brought together the old traditions of the republic with new innovation: most notably, he modified the traditional date for the festival, and placed himself at the focal centre of ritual and festivities.¹⁴ Horace’s hymn celebrating this “new age” reflects the tenor of the occasion:

If Rome is indeed your creation, if the squadrons that settled the Etruscan shore
came from Troy – a remnant bidden to change their home and city in a voyage
that brought salvation, for whom the righteous Aeneas, a Trojan survivor, built

¹¹ Wright, *Paul*, 294.

¹² Galinsky, *Augustus*, 90ff.

¹³ For details on the festival, see Galinsky, *Augustus*, 99-101.

¹⁴ See Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1.201ff.

unscathed through the blazing city a road to freedom, destined, as he was, to give them more than they had left behind – then, o ye gods, give sound character to a younger generation enabling them to learn; give rest to the old ensuring their contentment; and to the people of Romulus as a whole give wealth and children and every blessing. What the glorious descendent of Anchises and Venus asks of you with white oxen, may he obtain; may he be victorious in battle over his foes yet merciful once they are down. [...] Already Faith, Peace, and Honour, along with old-fashioned Decency and Virtue, who has been so long neglected, dare to return, and blessed Plenty with her full horn is seen by all.¹⁵

A few observations suffice to highlight the salient themes. First, Horace places the fate *and origins* of the Roman people firmly in the sphere of the divine. It is clear across the empire's mythology, and especially here, that Rome was founded because the gods willed it; that Augustus is "the glorious descendent" ordained by the Gods; that Rome's fate depends upon their continued goodwill towards the Roman people. This arrangement reflects quite precisely the tradition of benefactions and patronage prevalent throughout Roman society. Give appropriate thanks and honor to the gods, and the gods will look after Rome. All are implicated in this task.

Two, Rome's future hangs on proper and virtuous behaviour. Augustus had introduced sweeping moral reforms a few years earlier, focusing on proper marriage among other things, citing his purpose to "bring back into use many exemplary practices of our ancestors."¹⁶ Horace professes, in step with Augustus, that being Roman carries a responsibility for proper virtue and decency – the word "righteousness" is used by Horace, though John of Patmos uses the word quite differently. How is righteousness embodied? It is by emulating the piety demonstrated by the founding figures Aeneas and Romulus (see below), who sojourned with the gods, and by proper and virtuous behaviour. We have here a hint of what "true Romanness" looks like: piety, virtue, obedience, and sound character exercised within the sacral order.

¹⁵ Horace, *Carmen Saeculare* 37-60. Translation adapted from Wright, *Paul*, 299 and Galinsky, *Augustus*, 100f.

¹⁶ Augustus, *Res Gestae* 8.5. For details of the reforms, see Galinsky, *Augustus*, 96-9.

Three, victory is discerned to be the will of the gods for this new age, which resonates well with the way Augustus himself rose to power. The emperor is granted victory in battle provided a proper sacrifice is offered. The way to peace will be through victory – that is to say, through mastery of military arts and proper sacrifice to the gods.

As with other cultural projects of the era, it is possible to see this hymn as a project in casting a “sacred canopy” over the Augustan project. The hymn knits together themes of peace, victory, and piety, with rituals of hymn, prayer, and sacrifice. This “sacred canopy” is elaborated with deep connections to mythic history, bringing together the accomplishments of Augustus with the republic’s founding stories. Augustus, “the glorious descendent of Anchises and Venus,” is written into the centre of the story.

Augustan Myth in Virgil

If Horace captured the tone of Augustus’ new age for its inaugural event, it is Virgil’s *Aeneid* that would become a lasting national epic for the imperial project. The *Aeneid* tells the story of Aeneas, son-in-law of Priam, King of Troy, son also of the goddess Venus, setting out from the ancient ruins of Troy on a long and arduous journey to Italy, to Latium, and finally to the place where Rome is to be built. His journey is filled with struggle; being “tossed about on land and sea,” Aeneas demonstrates exemplary perseverance, arriving eventually at the site where Rome will be built. On that ordained place, Aeneas settles, and on that place his son Ascanius founds a first city, Alba Longa. Romulus – descended maternally through the descendants of Aeneas and paternally from the war-god Mars (note the link to war in this ancestry) – re-founds that original city as Rome. Virgil’s opening verses encapsulate this journey:

Arms and the man I sing, the first to come from Troy’s coasts, displaced by fate,
to Italy and the Lavinian shores. Much was he tossed about on land and sea by the

powers above because of Juno's unforgetting rage. Much, too, he suffered in war until he could found a city and bring his gods to Latium. From there rose the Latin race, the Alban fathers, and Rome's high walls.¹⁷

Later, the poet continues:

Through chance and change and hazard without end, our goal is Latium; where our destinies beckon to blessed abodes, and have ordained that Troy shall rise new-born! Have patience all! And bide expectantly that golden day.¹⁸

So Rome is birthed through hard work and fate, by divine will and through exemplary piety.

Virgil anticipates a rebirth of ancient Troy, a golden age! But we must not lose track of Virgil's tone amidst the triumphal language: while the *Aeneid* points forward to Rome's destined glory, it is anything but triumphal. "In the national epic," Karl Galinsky writes, "Rome is of course not built in a day – in fact, it is not built at all. That will come later; the emphasis is on the exertions (*labores*) and struggles of the founding father."¹⁹ We have here a national epic that celebrates not the glorious accomplishments of the past, but envisions that the greatest accomplishments await the Roman people in the future. The story demands a people who will labour with great dedication and exemplary piety to achieve the fulfillment of their destiny.

This epic of Aeneas' pilgrimage from Troy to Latium and of Romulus' city founded on Palatine Hill, was not entirely new to Virgil. The Romulus myth already circulated in various forms centuries beforehand, where it functioned as a founding myth for the republic.²⁰ Virgil took this weighty cultural story and reworked it for a new day. In the opening stanzas, the Muse is asked to "bring to memory (*memoria*)" the story of Aeneas. Some have seen that the *Aeneid* offers a poetic (re)construction of Roman social memory:²¹ it takes up the old story and offers a

¹⁷ Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.1-6.

¹⁸ Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.204-8.

¹⁹ Galinsky, *Augustus*, 84, 148.

²⁰ On the development of the Romulus myth in the republic, see T.P. Wiseman, *The Myths of Rome* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2004), 128-38.

²¹ See Galinsky, *Augustus*, 145; also Galinsky, *Memoria Romana*, 1.

new formulation of Roman identity linked to the reality of Augustus. Augustus himself mostly sits in the background of Virgil's narrative, alluded to here and there as the descendant and heir of Ascanius, who is known also as *Iulus* (Julius). Virgil writes Augustus into a small handful of visions, and this is where his intent becomes transparent. In book six, Aeneas is shown this prophecy:

Turn hither now your two-eyed gaze, and behold this nation, the Romans that are yours. Here is Caesar and all the seed of Iulus destined to pass under heaven's spacious sphere. And this in truth is he whom you so often hear promised you, Augustus Caesar, son of a god, who will again establish a golden age in Latium amid fields once ruled by Saturn; he will advance his empire beyond the Garamants and Indians to a land which lies beyond our stars, beyond the path of year and sun, where sky-bearing Atlas wheels on his shoulders the blazing star-studded-sphere... Not even Hercules traversed so much of earth's extent, though he pierced the stag of brazen foot, quieted the woods of Erymanthus, and made Lerna tremble at his bow...²²

As Aeneas peers into the future, he sees Augustus as a "promised one" who will establish a golden age and fulfill Rome's true destiny. Recall in comparison the Apocalypse's opening verses, the promise of Jesus "who was and who is and who is to come." The parallels between Lamb and Beast run deeper than John's own imagination, right to heart of the Roman national myth. The *Aeneid* presents here a teleological vision, pointing to the Augustan era as the climax of Rome's destiny. Augustus and his descendants will exceed the accomplishments of even Hercules (the *Greek* rather than *Roman* god is significant here); his empire will push beyond the bounds of the known earth. In historical time, as Virgil writes, Augustus had already inaugurated the *Pax Romana*. But in narrative time, all this lies yet in the future, as the long-awaited destiny of the Roman people. The *Aeneid* offers a coherent narrative that frames the present moment of

²² Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.780-803.

Augustus in visions of past and future. Notably, the *Aeneid* belonged to the “educational canon” that was taught as a standard text in Roman schools for 400 years.²³

The *Aeneid* envisions within its opening stanzas not only the birth of a city, but also the birth of a specially privileged people. If there is any doubt about the importance of ethnic construction within the empire, we need only see how the status and privileges conferred upon the Roman citizen – no matter how poor – exceeded those of the richest and most well-connected non-Roman subjects.²⁴ Belonging to the Latin people mattered. In the *Aeneid*, this people has a divinely ordained destiny:

Others, I doubt not, shall with softer mould beat out the breathing bronze, coax from the marble features to the life, plead cases with greater eloquence and with a pointer trace heaven’s motions and predict the risings of the stars; you, Roman, be sure to rule the world (be these your arts), to crown peace with justice, to spare the vanquished and to crush the proud.²⁵

On this point, Virgil’s work is virtually a construction of a Romanized “Manifest Destiny:” a privileged people will rule through conquest, establishing a reign of peace and justice across the world. Others might succeed in law, in art, in science: but this people is destined to rule. Whether such a sentiment preceded Virgil or resulted from his work I cannot tell, but it is an ideology that 400 years of schoolchildren would learn through Virgil. The vision for the Romans is *imperium sine fine*, empire without end. At one point Jupiter can be heard saying:

To these I set no bounds in space or time;
I have given them empire without end (*imperium sine fine*).
Even my Queen, Juno, who now chastises land and sea
with her dread frown, will find a wiser way,
and at my sovereign side protect and bless
the Romans, masters of the whole world,

²³ Greg Woolf, “Inventing Empire in Ancient Rome,” in *Empires: Perspectives from Archaeology and History*, ed. Susan E. Alcock et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 315.

²⁴ “Roman imperialism might be glossed ethnic domination, a dominance exercised not through rank, class, wealth, or gender, but by virtue of membership of a particular people” (Woolf, “Inventing Empire,” 314).

²⁵ Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.847-53.

who, clad in peaceful toga, judge mankind.²⁶

Again, we see the emphasis that Romans are divinely ordained masters of the world.

Of course there is much more to Virgil's masterpiece than I have highlighted here, but this limited discussion leads to my main conclusion: in the *Aeneid*, we have a national epic that "brings to memory" a shared past, a collective destiny, and a privileged place in the cosmic order.²⁷ It connects to the old republican story, but works Augustus into the middle of that storied history. The *Aeneid* is a project in mythmaking, producing a "usable past" that shapes Roman memory and identity.²⁸ It also sets up a clash between narratives: while Rome's narrative builds teleologically towards the present moment with the arrival of the promised Augustus, Second Temple Judaism had its own teleological narrative with its own promise of a renewed age. The clash between these two narratives comes to a head in the pages of the Apocalypse, though by the time of John of Patmos it had already culminated in disastrous conflict in the Judean War.

The work of Virgil is typical of the early empire: he is not the only writer to produce a "memory" of the past nor to connect Augustus to Aeneas and Troy.²⁹ This is the same era where Livy produced his massive *History*, and Ovid his *Metamorphoses*. Gowing gives attention to memory development through this era, writing that "memory lay at the very heart of power under the Principate."³⁰ He highlights how Augustus in his first act independent of the second triumvirate erased the somewhat sordid record of the triumvirate;³¹ how commemoration of the past reached unprecedented height during the Augustan era; how memory was revised not to

²⁶ Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.278-84.

²⁷ See Woolf, "Inventing Empire," 315.

²⁸ Revell, *Roman Imperialism*, 107.

²⁹ Gowing, *Empire and Memory*, 19.

³⁰ Gowing, *Empire and Memory*, 2.

³¹ Gowing, *Empire and Memory*, 2.

break with the past, but to place Augustus squarely in the middle of it.³² A picture emerges of memory discourse carefully managed and controlled by the emperor.

II. Myth in Material Culture

While the above discussion highlights the mythic discourse that was developing in the early empire, it does not explain how these myths were commemorated on a wide scale. The vast majority of the population was not sufficiently literate to read the works of literature produced by Virgil, Ovid, and Livy. While the *Aeneid* was taught as a standard text in schools across the empire, it was still the literate elite who had opportunity to attend such schools. This section turns attention to a number of ways the Augustan Myth made its way into common cultural discourse, shaping a cultural memory by reconfiguring the experience of space and time.

Imperial Architecture: Reconfiguring Space

Augustus famously proclaimed to have discovered Rome as a city of bricks and left it a city of marble. There is some accuracy to this claim.³³ The renewal of the city with its large building projects and physical transformation of civic space became a visible reminder of the renewal Augustus was working across the empire: it announced architecturally that a “new age” had indeed arrived in Rome, that Augustus was indeed busy “making all things new.”

One feature of the restored city was of course the Augustan Forum. Widely heralded as one of the most beautiful buildings in the ancient world, the forum stood prominently on Palatine Hill. Featured front and centre in the Augustan Forum was the temple of Mars Ultor (Mars the Avenger).³⁴ Legend suggests that Octavian made a vow to build a temple for Mars because of the god’s role in avenging his father’s assassins.³⁵ Locating the god of war at the centre of the

³² Gowing, *Empire and Memory*, 145.

³³ See Galinsky, *Augustus*, 152-4; Beard, North, Price, *Religions*, 1.184-6.

³⁴ The forum’s layout is schematized in Beard, North, and Price, *Religions*, 2.81.

³⁵ Beard, North, and Price, *Religions*, 1.199f.

Augustan forum makes its own symbolic statement about the role of war and victory in the imperial project. Beyond symbolic discourse, the temple served a number of military functions: commanders set off from the temple; the senate met in it to vote triumphs; victorious generals were to dedicate to Mars the symbols of their triumphs.³⁶ On the stairs leading up to the temple was an altar where sacrifices could be performed. Beyond the altar stand five statues: Mars is central, flanked by Romulus and Venus on one side, and Fortuna and Roma on the other.

Directly in front of the temple, at the physical centre of the forum, a statue of Augustus stands prominently in a chariot. He provides a focal point plainly under the watchful patronage of the gods. The left and right sides of the forum are lined with statues of republican heroes, 108 in all, with inscriptions itemizing their accomplishments. These include great military generals for the most part, and other statesmen who contributed to the rise or expansion of Rome.³⁷ In a not-so-subtle nod to the founding myth, Aeneas stands in a portico to the left of the temple, flanked by Augustus' ancestors, the Julian family. Mirroring this portico, to the right of the temple, stands Romulus, son of Mars and founder of Rome, flanked by more republican heroes.

The forum functions as a "memory theater," inscribing significant figures and accomplishments of the republican past, evoking connections between victory and piety, summing up the foundation story of Aeneas and Romulus, and reminding viewers of the privileged ancestry of Augustus. Augustus is placed as "another in a long line of illustrious republican magistrates, taking his rightful place in this republican memory place."³⁸ Augustus stands as victorious warrior under the patronage and protection of Mars. Walking around the forum could leave no doubt about Augustus' unique place in these founding myths and his role

³⁶ Beard, North, and Price, *Religions*, 1.199.

³⁷ Gowing, *Empire and Memory*, 144.

³⁸ Gowing, *Empire and Memory*, 144.

in the cosmic order. For all intents and purposes, the forum is the *Aeneid* carved of stone and marble.³⁹

Other sites in Rome similarly announced the Augustan themes with evocative connections to the founding myth. The *Ara Pacis*, Rome's "altar of peace", shows on one side a pious religious procession of the imperial family.⁴⁰ Beside the entrance, Aeneas offers a sacrifice to the gods. Peace and piety are inextricably linked. The south frieze features a woman who sits with two male children on her lap, perhaps an allusion to the mythical twins Romulus and Remus. She is surrounded by symbols of fertility, vegetation, and contented farm animals. To her left is a bird, and to her right a sea monster. Between sea and sky sits this familial personification of prosperous peace. Everything about the altar promotes a sense of tranquility: it is a visual illustration of the *Pax Romana*. Significantly, sitting opposite the woman of peace is a frieze of Roma, perched triumphantly atop a pile of arms with sword in hand. We have seen this motif before: peace is secured through victories. Quite significantly, the *Ara Pacis* sits upon the field of Mars, where armies trained prior to being sent into the field. Equally significantly, a sundial was located so the shadow would bisect the altar on Augustus' birthday, tying the memory of the *Pax Romana* to Augustus' birth.

A third example comes after Augustus, illustrating how myth and history continued to converge in Roman architecture. After the death of Titus, Domitian constructed the Arch of Titus near Rome's central forum in 82 CE.⁴¹ A frieze inside the arch depicts a procession of young men carrying various objects, a golden menorah and trumpet clearly distinguishable among them. The frieze is a triumphal illustration of Judea's conquest and humiliation. Captives in the

³⁹ "It brought into public view the same sort of connections with the past that were being made in literature, most notably in Virgil's *Aeneid* [...] and Livy's History" (Gowing, *Empire and Memory*, 138).

⁴⁰ Galinsky, *Augustus*, 94, 156f; Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, 57-9; Beard, North, and Price, *Religions* 2.82-5; Wright, *Paul*, 296.

⁴¹ Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, 93f.

frieze carry sacred objects, plundered from the Jerusalem temple, along the *Via Sacra* into the heart of Rome. It is said by Josephus that the treasures plundered from the temple following the war flooded the market in such great quantities that gold fell to half its previous value.⁴² The arch thus presents a stunning and enduring memory of Titus' victory, the humiliation of Judea, and the folly of resisting the empire. Architecture became a way in which memories could be commemorated for political reasons, at the very centre of public spaces. This particular example announces broadly what the *Pax Romana* was all about: empire that achieves its peace through victory.

These select examples demonstrate how the Augustan Myth makes itself visible within ordinary civic space in the city of Rome. Memory weaves itself into the fabric of the city's architecture; the very act of rebuilding proclaims the arrival of a "new age" to all who walk the streets. Moving outside the city of Rome towards the provinces, similar patterns emerge. Simon Price has offered perhaps the most comprehensive study on the subject, and concludes that the introduction of the emperor into the cities of Asia Minor, like in Rome, had significant impact on civic space.⁴³ He writes: "the impact of the emperor on architecture of the Greek cities was considerable. The various monuments in his honor, gates, fountains, porticoes, and especially temples, placed the emperor within the physical framework of the city, which they thus transformed."⁴⁴

Price cites Ephesus as an example where civic space is reorganized around the emperor. By the end of the first century, the city centre featured four imperial temples, an Antonine altar, an imperial portico, four gymnasia associated with the emperor, and a large number of imperial

⁴² Josephus, *War* 2.152f; cf. Kraybill, *Apocalypse*, 94.

⁴³ Price, *Rituals and Power*, 136-46.

⁴⁴ Price, *Rituals and Power*, 169.

statues.⁴⁵ In Ephesus the emperor's name or image "met the eye at every turn."⁴⁶ The temple of Augustus dating to about 27 BCE was an early addition featured prominently in the upper square of the city, though its exact location is debated. Later, the provincial Temple of the Sebastoi dedicated to Domitian was added, built on a raised platform above one side of the upper square. Here stood a seven-to-eight-meter statue of Domitian in military breastplate: Domitian the victorious warrior, towering above the city. Some have wondered if this towering statue of Domitian may have prompted John's vision of a beast rising out of the earth, though I have already suggested that John's image is less specific. In front of Domitian's temple stands an altar covered with a medley of shields, spears, armour, trophies, and a bound captive.⁴⁷ The theme of victory achieved through sacrifice, now tied to Domitian rather than Augustus, runs strong here outside Rome.⁴⁸

Beyond buildings, the landscape of Asia Minor was dotted with statues of the emperor.⁴⁹ These statues stood in temples but also in baths, gymnasia, civic buildings, city gates, and other public spaces. There is question about whether statues in and of themselves could communicate much narrative meaning: gazing upon a statue would not necessarily tell the founding story of Aeneas or other memories of the empire.⁵⁰ However, as these stories were rehearsed in other ways, oral and written, the presence of the statues throughout the *polis* would certainly become a visual reminder of the presence of the emperor and his story. Rivell writes that "in towns outside Rome, the creation of groups of imperial statues, with associated inscriptions, may also have become not only an aide-memoire to an imperial history, but a way in which that new history

⁴⁵ Price, *Rituals and Power*, 135.

⁴⁶ Price, *Rituals and Power*, 136.

⁴⁷ Price, *Rituals and Power*, 157.

⁴⁸ Price, *Rituals and Power*, 159.

⁴⁹ Price, *Rituals and Power*, 181ff.

⁵⁰ Hence Wiseman: "The 'landscape of memory' ... served as a reminder of stories the people knew, but could not in itself generate the knowledge" ("Popular Memory" in *Memoria Romana*, 62).

was created and learnt.”⁵¹ We might say that the landscape of the Roman *polis* was not just reorganized around the emperor: it was a “re-narrated” landscape, telling a story of renewal, victory, and *imperium*.

Wright suggests that imperial architecture, both in Rome and across the eastern Mediterranean, “formed a kind of stage set on which ordinary people played out the dramas of their lives, with the Augustan metanarrative providing the basic script around which they, corporately and individually, would improvise their parts.”⁵² The above evidence suggests he is right. With civic space structured around evocative symbols of myth and cult, daily interaction with the civic environment plays the role similar to Virgil’s Muse, bringing to memory the empire’s mythology in the context of the *polis*. Through this constant presence of memory, common civic life becomes scripted into an ongoing performance of the Augustan Myth, a myth that defines the social world and is itself structured to encourage participation through hard work and piety.

Mass Media

Architecture is not the only way myth was commemorated in common experience. A world without printing presses, billboards, and TV spots necessitated other strategies for mass communication and coinage fit the bill as media that could be produced in quantity and widely circulated. A brief survey of the evidence illustrates some examples of how coins were used as commemorative media:

⁵¹ Rivell, *Roman Imperialism*, 104.

⁵² Wright, *Paul*, 330.

(1) Commemorating the key Augustan themes and their divine connections, a set of three *denarii* released before 31 BCE each features one of Pax, Venus, and Victoria.⁵³ The front side features Octavian, while the reverse is engraved *Caesar Divi F(ilius)*, “Caesar son of a god”.

(2) Commemorating the Augustan theme of renewal, an *aureus* minted most likely in Ephesus in 28 BCE shows Augustus holding a scroll. The inscription on the coin reads, “he restored laws and rights to the *res publica*,” a particular way of memorializing Augustus’ achievements and connecting them to the past.

(3) Commemorating the relationship between peace and victory, a *tetradrachma* from Pergamum depicts the provincial temple of Rome and Augustus.⁵⁴ Inside Augustus stands in military uniform holding a spear. To his left stands Roma, crowning the victorious emperor with one hand, while holding a cornucopia in the other.

(4) Commemorating military accomplishment, a *denarius* from the reign of Nero in 64-65 CE shows Nero on the front side with the inscription *Nero Caesar Augustus*. On the reverse sits a portrait of Roma, holding a nike (symbol of victory) in her hand.⁵⁵

(5) Commemorating peace through victory, a *denarius* from 70 CE depicts Vespasian on one side, and on the other a defeated woman sitting in front of a Roman trophy. The woman personifies “Judea,” which is also inscribed on the coin.⁵⁶

(6) The Judea theme continues with an *as* coin from 77-78 CE. Here, Judea is personified as a defeated woman sitting under a palm tree with a pile of captured weapons behind her. The coin reads *IUDAEA CAPTA*, Judea captive.⁵⁷

⁵³ Galinsky, *Augustus*, 49.

⁵⁴ Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 30.

⁵⁵ Kraybill, *Apocalypse*, 161.

⁵⁶ Kraybill, *Apocalypse*, 73.

⁵⁷ Kraybill, *Apocalypse*, 94.

(7) Commemorating again military accomplishment, a *sestertius* from 85 CE shows a soldier, probably Domitian, sitting atop a horse and charging into battle. The horse is trampling a German tribesman while the soldier poses with his weapon ready to kill.⁵⁸

Similar to architecture which reconfigured civic space around the emperor, these coins incorporate images of the emperor, representations of military victories, and evocative symbols of peace and victory within the rhythm of daily commerce. The accomplishments of Augustus and his successors were kept close to mind. In the case of *Iudaea Capta*, the coins circulated some 25 years following the fall of Jerusalem. They ensured Judea's humiliation was well established in memory across the empire.

The Calendar: Reconfiguring Time

A third dimension to commemorating the Augustan myth in civic life is the rearrangement of the calendar in Asia Minor.⁵⁹ In 9 BCE the province held a contest to determine the best way to further honour Augustus twenty years after his triumphal return to Rome. The winning submission came from the Roman Proconsul, who suggested that the province could adopt a calendar organized around his birthday. The shift was not a dramatic one for most cities: Augustus' birthday fell on September 23 and many cities already organized time around the fall equinox. But it was nonetheless a highly symbolic gesture reinforced by cycles of festivals marking the event each year. The proposal put before the provincial council is given in part as follows:

[It is difficult to know whether?] the birthday of the most divine Caesar is a matter of greater pleasure or of greater benefit. We could justly consider that day to be equal to the beginning of all things. He restored the form of all things to usefulness, if not to their natural state, since it had deteriorated and suffered misfortune. He gave a new appearance to the whole world, which would gladly have accepted its own destruction had Caesar not been born for the common good

⁵⁸ Kraybill, *Apocalypse*, 103.

⁵⁹ Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 32-4; Wright, *Paul*, 325-7.

fortune of all. Thus a person could justly consider this to be the beginning of life and of existence, and the end of regrets about having been born.⁶⁰

Augustus is heralded as “the beginning of all things” and the restorer of that which had been worn down. This echoes Augustus’ inauguration of the *Pax Romana* and subsequent restoration of the republic and rebuilding of the city. It is again the mythology of Augustus’ new age. The council adopted the calendar, the language of its decree exceeding even the mood of the proconsul:

Whereas the providence that ordains our whole life has established with zeal and distinction that which is most perfect in our life by bringing Augustus, whom she filled with virtue as a benefaction to all humanity; sending to us and to those after us a savior who put an end to war and brought order to all things; and Caesar, when he appeared, the hopes of those who preceded [...] the birth of the god was the beginning of good tidings to the world through him [...]⁶¹

Augustus, a gift to all humanity! A saviour who has ended war! A fulfillment of long awaited hopes! Good tidings (*euangelia*) indeed for the world. We see here distinctly the mood and language with which Augustus was honoured, and the way his accomplishments were commemorated. A commemorative calendar, Catherine Bell writes, imposes “socially meaningful definitions to the passage of time.”⁶² Here, time is given meaning relative to the birth of Augustus, marking the arrival of this “saviour” and linking into the narrative of his rise to power.

Time was also marked in the province by the cycle of festivals, which increased dramatically in frequency during the early empire.⁶³ The establishment of the provincial temple at Pergamum inaugurated also the annual games of Roma and Augustus. In the early empire, new festivals were added to the calendar, while at the same time preexisting festivals “took on

⁶⁰ Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 33. The beginning of the edict has been lost.

⁶¹ Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 34.

⁶² Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 102.

⁶³ Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 126.

new dimensions with prayers and sacrifices to the emperors added to the older traditions.”⁶⁴

Celebration was not confined to one segment of the community: rather, festivals gathered together the community as a whole in widespread participation.⁶⁵ Often lasting for days at a time, festivals incorporated religious performance of sacrifice and procession with athletics, competitions, and oral and musical performances.

These festivals, T.P. Wiseman has argued,⁶⁶ function as a primary venue for storytelling in the empire. The festivals were themselves an *enactment* of myth, commemorating important pasts and incorporating practices of piety into community life. But they were also an important strategy for *disseminating* myth:

The great majority of Romans did not read books; they learned what they needed to know at the *ludi scaenici* and the other festivals of their gods, where epic bards, hymnodists, dramatists, and dance librettists created that composite narrative of the past.⁶⁷

Wiseman’s observations shed light on the question of how the Augustan Myth came to be broadly communicated among a non-literate population. The great works of literature were not restricted to text form. We know that works like the *Aeneid* were primarily created for public oral performances.⁶⁸ Hymns and prayers, as we saw with Horace’s *Carmen Saeculare*, also played a major role in articulating imperial memory.⁶⁹ In this environment, Wiseman makes the significant observation that “an ordinary person could get a decent literary and historical education without ever having to open a book.”⁷⁰ The stories were told and retold in public gatherings for the whole community to hear – and then reinforced through daily interactions with the civic environment, which pointed back to those stories in civic life.

⁶⁴ Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 126; Price, *Rituals and Power*, 103f.

⁶⁵ Price, *Rituals and Power*, 108.

⁶⁶ See Wiseman, “Popular Memory.”

⁶⁷ Wiseman, “Popular Memory,” 57.

⁶⁸ Wiseman, “Popular Memory,” 53.

⁶⁹ Wiseman, “Popular Memory,” 53-4.

⁷⁰ Wiseman, “Popular Memory,” 62.

III. Myth in Imperial Cults

The final form of discourse I explore in this chapter is the imperial cults. While theorists have shown at length the connections between social memory and ritual as a practice of embodied storytelling, very little work has been done to highlight connections between Roman memory and ruler cults in the early empire. I provide here what amounts to an outline of possible directions rather than a thoroughgoing analysis.

Having already touched on imperial images, I would like to focus here on the ritual aspect of imperial cults. On a social level, ritual can function in different ways. One is in relation to the social construction of power. Theorists like Clifford Geertz play a leading role here. Geertz sees that in ritual, “the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world.”⁷¹ Ritual, in other words, is highly symbolic action through which ideologies take concrete shape in social life. Notably, ritual in Geertz’s view is not a matter of personal “religious experience,” but has important social and political dimensions. Additionally, ritual is not just a matter of *legitimizing* political power. Ritual actively *constructs* power relations in society. Catherine Bell writes, “the king’s cult creates the king, defines kingliness, and orchestrates a cosmic framework within which the social hierarchy headed by the king is perceived as natural and right.”⁷²

This analysis has been fruitfully applied to the Roman imperial cults, with the result that the cults are widely understood to play a central role in constructing Roman imperial hegemony. For example, Simon Price sees that the cults articulated a relationship of power between ruled and ruler, and simultaneously enhanced the status of the local elite. In this way, the cults became

⁷¹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 112.

⁷² Bell, *Ritual*, 129.

“a major part of the web of power that formed the fabric of society.”⁷³ Steven Friesen similarly points to the way imperial cults constructed an imperial cosmology that put Rome at the centre of space and time.⁷⁴

Ritual can also function as commemorative activity. In commemorative ritual, the enactment of ritual serves as symbolic action that brings to mind important historical events in the life of a community. Ritual rehearses and rehabilitates the community’s master narratives in densely symbolic forms. Commemorative ritual is as an immensely formative process of social memory that not only recalls, but also forges identities and shapes worldviews around key narratives. In Judaism, the Seder meal and its reconstruction of the Exodus event is precisely such a commemorative ritual, as is the Christian celebration of the Eucharist. In Asia Minor, I have argued here that the Augustan Myth is one strand of that key narrative.

I cannot tell from the available evidence the degree to which ritual in the imperial cults served a commemorative purpose. As has been rehearsed throughout this chapter, lines cannot be so easily drawn between history, memory, and power in first century culture, so the lines between ritual as commemoration and ritual as social power probably need blurring. Augustus stepped into a time of immense civil disruption, established peace, and led Rome into a new era. That is how the history unfolded, it is how Augustus consolidated power, and with some glossing over ugly details, it is how the story was told in the national myths.

While I am reluctant to make sweeping generalizations about the commemorative nature of the imperial cults, there are some clear commemorative dimensions that can be named:

(1) An important aspect of commemorative ritual is marking the rhythm of time.⁷⁵

Certain festivals and accompanying rituals were organized around Augustus’ birthday. Through

⁷³ Price, *Rituals and Power*, 248.

⁷⁴ Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 54.

calendar and ritual, Augustus' birthday was rehabilitated each year as a steady drumbeat that organized time around the "beginning" offered by Augustus.

(2) Sacrifices were often performed in front of images of the emperor.⁷⁶ As we have seen, these images took a limited range of forms – military, divine, or citizen – and in the case of the provincial temples in Asia Minor, two of three cities (Pergamum and Ephesus) depict the emperor as a warrior. These sacrifices rehabilitate the connection established in the national myths between sacrifice and victory, between piety and national security. Meanwhile they also commemorate the military accomplishments of the emperor being honoured. Friesen observes: "military dominance is not the only theme found in the imperial cult materials but is certainly one of the most important ones. Armed victory had created the empire, and military strength sustained the imperial system."⁷⁷

(3) As narrated in Horace and Virgil, the origins and fate of the Roman people hinged on ongoing demonstrations of piety in exchange for divine benefactions. Horace once wrote: "You rule, Roman, because you keep yourself lesser than the gods: with them all things begin, to them refer each outcome."⁷⁸ Ritual expresses this very special relationship between empire, emperor, and the gods: it may not be the case that rituals were structured to commemorate national myths, but the national myths were nonetheless implicated. The myth demanded that the rituals be performed.

While I resist then drawing the conclusion that commemoration was a *primary* goal of ritual in the imperial cults, the above three points establish a very close correlation between ritual and memory as it is elaborated in the Augustan myth. Indeed there is a very close relationship

⁷⁵ Bell, *Ritual*, 102.

⁷⁶ Price, *Rituals and Power*, 188.

⁷⁷ Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 176.

⁷⁸ Horace, *Odes* 3.6.5-6.

between imperial rites and commemoration of the Augustan Myth, so neither one makes sense without the other, and together religion and memory form one complex and self-reinforcing reality.

IV. Memory and Romanness

This chapter has surveyed the many ways Roman memory and identity was articulated in the early empire: through music and literature, architecture and rearranged civic space, festivals and performances, and through a diversity of imperial rites. The Roman *polis* was richly narrated, with the Augustan Myth forming one important but not exclusive strand of Roman memory.

Louise Revell writes, “from Augustus onwards, the history of the empire increasingly revolved around the history of the emperor and his achievements; alternative histories were rewritten as a single mythological past and thus became communal memory.”⁷⁹ By creating a shared sense of history through these literary, architectural, and performative aspects of Roman culture, the empire was able to shape a broad discourse of Romanness.⁸⁰

The history is one designed to foster participation. It valorizes efforts directed to build the “dream” of which Augustus was only the beginning. That dream is of a golden age, to be achieved under a divinely ordained empire, with a heavy dose of Manifest Destiny thrown in. The Romans will bring peace, security, and justice to all. In the meantime, hard labour and proper piety is called for to advance towards that promised destiny.

Within this narrating of history, cities competed for honours to contribute positively to the empire; ordinary people worked out their place within the urban structure; the emperor was celebrated through festivals and the gods honoured with acts of piety. All this contributed

⁷⁹ Revell, *Roman Imperialism*, 103.

⁸⁰ Revell, *Roman Imperialism*, 192.

towards the glorious goal for which Rome was destined. It also ensured that through their active participation in imperial life, Rome's power was consolidated as ordinary citizens saw their interests and the empire's interests as one and the same.

Chapter 4: ‘The Word of God and the Testimony of Jesus’ Products of Social Memory in the Apocalypse

In the same way that the landscape of the Roman *polis* was narrated with reminders of imperial narratives that met the eye at every turn, the Apocalypse is its own kind of “memory theatre.” This textual landscape is dotted not with buildings and monuments pointing to the emperor, but with layer upon layer of allusions pointing to Hebrew scriptures and some elements of the Jesus tradition. These “textual monuments” hit the reader with force from the outset: the very first time John turns to “see” a vision (1:12), the reader is immersed in a dense amalgamation of texts including Dan 10:5-6, Zech 4:2, Dan 7:9, Isa 11:15, and Ezek 1:25-26. From there on, the reader is whisked off with John into a textual landscape that is densely narrated by Hebrew memory.

This chapter focuses on the products of social memory that are at the heart of the Apocalypse: the Hebrew and Jesus traditions that John asserts as normative memories for discipleship communities. I argue that John wants his hearers – both Jew and Greek – to remember these “old stories” as *their* story, so that through these allusions he intends to draw the listening community into the ancient story-world of the Hebrew scriptures. This story-world confronts the Augustan myth with alternative stories of salvation, and rivals the empire’s logic of participation with stories that animate faithful resistance. It is necessary to begin, however, with a brief discussion about the legacy of scholarship on John’s use of Hebrew scriptures.

I. John’s Use of Hebrew Scriptures

Allusions to Hebrew texts in the Apocalypse are a complex reality. John never cites the scriptures directly. He never uses a citation formula (e.g. “it is written”). We cannot tell if John has in front of him Hebrew texts or the Greek Septuagint: “the likelihood is that John draws from

both Semitic and Greek biblical sources and often modifies both.”¹ On close study, we find that John is influenced not only by words and symbols, but also by literary structures, thought patterns, even grammar,² all while he takes creative liberties everywhere. It becomes almost impossible to tell on a verse-by-verse basis where allusions are clearly intended and where we are seeing a little too much.³ John’s creative liberties have led some to question the degree to which he respects the materials he incorporates into his own composition.⁴ Does John respect the context and interpretive tradition of these “old stories”? Or does he borrow their language without regard for meaning, to suit his own purposes?

Until recently, the prevailing assessment has taken the latter option. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues, for example, that John “does not interpret the OT but uses its words, images, phrases, and patterns as a language arsenal in order to make his own theological statement or express his own prophetic vision.”⁵ Because John never formally cites a Hebrew text, Schüssler Fiorenza argues that it is not his intention to repeat these texts. Rather, his use is governed by a creative impulse that is consistent with the prophetic vocation that “creates; it does not quote in order to teach or to argue.”⁶ If the Apocalypse shows little interest in prior meanings, then we will have trouble arguing for a Hebrew narrative memory at work in the Apocalypse.

A convergence of three recent studies has provided a sober and methodical reconsideration of these prior positions:

¹ G.K. Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* (JSNTS 166; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 62.

² See Beale, *John’s Use*, 318-55.

³ Studies counting the number of allusions to Hebrew scriptures range from 150 allusions to 700. The Apocalypse as a whole is 405 verses in length. See Jan Fekkes, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions in the Book of Revelation: Visionary Antecedents and their Development* (JSNTS 93; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 62.

⁴ On this question and possible responses, see Beale, *John’s Use*, 67-71.

⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 135.

⁶ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Justice and Judgment*, 136. A substantial rebuttal of this position is offered in Bauckham, *Climax*, 262n32, 297-8, as well as Beale, *John’s Use*, 68-9.

Steve Moyise⁷ takes an intertextual approach to the Apocalypse. He argues that any literary allusion takes a text out of its first context and creates new meanings in its new context. It is not a question of whether John intends to create new meanings or respect old ones: both aspects are part of the nature of any intertextual connection. Nevertheless, Moyise argues, “the quoted text does not accept this ‘relocation’ without a fight.”⁸ The new composition does not silence the voice of its subtexts, but previous meanings “linger in the air and lure the reader [...] back into the symbolic world of scripture.”⁹ Since multiple voices are permitted to speak at once, the reader plays a role in hearing the distinct voices and finding the meaning that unfolds in the interaction between them. In the Apocalypse, the voices of prior Hebrew scriptures “get a purchase on larger meanings, evoke finer resonances and penetrate the recesses of the mind.”¹⁰

G.K. Beale¹¹ concurs with the “unanimous consensus” that John uses the Hebrew scriptures with “a high degree of liberty and creativity.”¹² Nevertheless, like Moyise, he does not see that “disregard for context” is the necessary logical implication of this creative impulse.¹³ Beale finds no indication that John makes new allusions without intending to create strong resonances with previous contexts.¹⁴

Beale produces a categorizing scheme of the various ways John uses Hebrew texts. There are eight usage patterns in all;¹⁵ the significant ones for our purposes include:

⁷ Steve Moyise, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation* (JSNTS 115; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

⁸ Moyise, *Old Testament*, 19.

⁹ Moyise, *Old Testament*, 113.

¹⁰ Moyise, *Old Testament*, 108.

¹¹ “The Various Ways John Uses the Old Testament” in Beale, *John’s Use*, 60-294.

¹² Beale, *John’s Use*, 67.

¹³ Beale responds to Schüssler Fiorenza by noting, following Fekkes, that the prophetic spirit may create but “does not necessarily create *ex nihilo*, as apparent from the exilic and post-exilic prophets who reused, reformulated, and actualized prior prophetic material” (*John’s Use*, 68-9).

¹⁴ Beale, *John’s Use*, 73-4.

¹⁵ Beale, *John’s Use*, 75-126.

(1) *Using segments of scripture as literary prototypes.* John models broad sections of the Apocalypse after entire texts and sequences. For example, Babylon's judgment in 18:9-23 largely follows the literary model of Tyre's judgment in Ezek 26-27, including the presence of a list of cargoes. The sequences of trumpets (8:6-12) and bowls (16:1-9) are modeled on the paradigm of the Exodus plagues (Exod 7-14).

(2) *Thematic use of the Hebrew scriptures.* John takes up major themes including judgment, salvation, holy war, and covenant.

(3) *Analogical use of the Hebrew scriptures.* Archetypal persons, places, and events are brought forward into John's composition as analogies, retaining characteristics and themes from their previous context. For example: places – Sodom (11:8), Egypt (11:8), Babylon (17:5), New Jerusalem (21:2); and persons – Jezebel (2:20-23), Elijah (11:6), Moses (11:6).

Beale is able to conclude from his study that John's use of the Hebrew scriptures "shows a careful understanding of Old Testament contexts, and his interpretation shows significant influence from the Old Testament itself."¹⁶ In agreement with Moyise, Beale suggests that these prior traditions function as a servant and a guide to the Apocalypse: the new interprets the old and the old interprets the new. Beale concludes, "John probably saw his presuppositions as organically growing out of the Old Testament itself and out of Christ's own approach to interpreting the Old Testament."¹⁷

*Jan Fekkes*¹⁸ provides a third useful insight. Rather than trying to account for all possible allusions in his study, Fekkes' methodological innovation focuses on the strongest echoes of Hebrew scriptures: those allusions that are "certain/virtually certain" as opposed to those that are

¹⁶ Beale, *John's Use*, 128.

¹⁷ Beale, *John's Use*, 128.

¹⁸ See especially "John and the Influence of the Old Testament" in *Isaiah*, 59-103.

“possible” or “doubtful.” He then discerns a thematic inventory that accounts for almost all of the strongest allusions.¹⁹

In applying this methodology, Fekkes is able to show that “John’s use is in general consciously systematic and purposeful. Rather than discovering a conglomerate of divergent texts, one continually encounters various clusters of tradition.”²⁰ In other words, John is quite intentional about the themes he develops. He creates allusions that are exegetically appropriate for his themes. Fekkes suggests that it is not specific *books* of the Hebrew scriptures that guide John’s thought, but specific *themes* that guide him towards various texts.²¹

Each of these studies represents a significant advance in the state of the question about John’s use of the Hebrew scriptures. While each study approaches the question in a different way, and there is some difference in the specifics of the outcomes, a good deal of confidence is shared among these scholars that John’s use of Hebrew scriptures is (1) purposeful; (2) thematic; and (3) respects (or at least carries) earlier meanings. We proceed to consider the major Hebrew themes found in the Apocalypse under the cover provided by these three studies, understanding that John has not made these thematic connections haphazardly or incidentally, but has purpose in forging connections to “old stories” and their larger meanings.

II. Narrating a Hebrew Memory

The Apocalypse builds its narrative not on marginal echoes from obscure corners of the Hebrew scriptures, but on the main strands of a thoroughgoing Hebrew memory. The Exodus, the divine warrior, and prophetic oracles each play a role in unfolding the apocalyptic drama. I offer a brief overview of these themes.

¹⁹ Fekkes, *Isaiah*, 70-71.

²⁰ Fekkes, *Isaiah*, 70.

²¹ Fekkes, *Isaiah*, 103.

Exodus

The Exodus is one of the controlling narratives of the Apocalypse. All of the main elements are present: Moses (15:3-4); a cry that sets events in motion (6:10, 8:3-5); judgment in the form of plagues sequences (8:6-9:21, 16:1-21); failure to repent (9:21, 16:9, 16:11); allusions to Passover (5:9);²² a song by the sea (15:3-4); Sinai and the formation of a “priestly nation” (1:6, 5:10). John’s climatic imperative at 18:4 completes the Exodus motif: “Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues” (18:4//Jer 51:45). While this latter allusion is to Jeremiah, I suggest that it echoes but inverts the refrain to Pharaoh “let my people go” (Exod 8:1, 8:20, 9:1, etc.).

In many ways the Exodus motif provides a natural analogy for the Apocalypse. It recalls the archetypal confrontation between God and an ancient empire: YHWH the warrior (Exod 15:3) faces down Egypt’s unbridled political power and military might. Other Jewish sources invoke the Exodus to confront similar political realities.²³ But to say the Exodus motif is a “good fit” for John’s purposes only partially gets to the point. The Exodus narrative is much weightier than that. It forms the very heart of Hebrew memory and identity (Deut 6:20-25, 26:4-11). Therefore, the story invites us to be attentive not only to how John draws an analogy from his sociopolitical situation to that of the Exodus, but also how he encourages identification with that earlier community.

The plague sequences in 8:6-9:21 and 16:1-21 provide the most sustained connection to the Exodus narrative, though as noted, connections are made on many levels throughout the Apocalypse. While there are differences in the ordering and content of these two plague

²² cf. Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 70-71. Loren Johns disputes that the Lamb symbol is in fact the Passover Lamb – see below.

²³ Bauckham lists Isa 11:11-12:6, 43:14-21, 51:10-11, 1 Enoch 1:4, 1QM 1-2, Ap. Abr. 30:2-31:1 (*Theology*, 70).

sequences, and between the Apocalypse and the plagues of Exodus 7-10, all three sequences share many of the same themes.²⁴ The trumpet sequence shares the first, seventh, eighth, and ninth plagues of Exodus (water to blood, hail and thunder, locusts, darkness). Its effects are limited to one third of the earth. The bowl sequence shares the first, second, sixth, seventh, and ninth plagues of Exodus (water to blood, frogs, boils, hail and thunder, darkness), and these plagues are poured out on the whole earth. Each sequence incorporates other visionary sources not part of the Exodus narrative (e.g. 9:7-10//Joel 2:4-5), but derives its overall structure and image base from the Exodus motif itself.²⁵

These plagues play a central role in the way the Apocalypse envisions the judgment of the beast and its followers. Following the pattern of the Exodus plagues, the trumpet and bowl sequences are each a series of intensifying disasters brought by God upon to recalcitrant people. They are meant to summon forth repentance but the outcome, mirroring Pharaoh, is entrenched defiance (9:20-21, 16:9, 11, 21). While the plagues of Exodus affect Egypt only, the plagues in the Apocalypse are directed against the whole earth, likely because “the whole earth followed the beast with wonder” (13:3). Only those who have been marked with the seal of God and “redeemed” by the blood of the Lamb (is this a Passover image?) are spared this fate (7:3, 14:4).

It is important to recognize that the destruction named in the plagues does not need to play out in a historical sense for the rhetoric to have its intended effect. The mere rehearsal of the plagues in this context connects Rome to Pharaoh’s Egypt, and says, “this empire is really like that one.” In making this connection to the archetypal enemy, the world has already been shaken for the listening community. The ideology of Rome is already being deconstructed for the listening community on a symbolic level, if not on a historical one.

²⁴ Barr, *Tales*, 210-11; Blount, *Revelation*, 166; Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 506.

²⁵ On seven plagues instead of ten, see for example: Ps 78:43-51, Ps 105:27-36, Amos 4:6-11 (Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 506).

The issue in the plagues is not solely judgment. As Terrance Fretheim has seen, the plagues in Exodus ultimately point to disruption and decay at the root of creation.²⁶ Fretheim makes the connection in the Ancient Near East between creation and the moral order, arguing that Pharaoh's world disrupts the moral order because it is fundamentally a vision that is anti-life and anti-neighbour. As such, Pharaoh, like the sea-beast of the Apocalypse, acts as an embodiment of chaos. In the plagues, natural elements break the bounds of normal behaviour because Pharaoh has enacted policies that have weakened the fabric of creation that otherwise holds them in check.²⁷ The world is returning to its chaotic state. The plagues make visible the presence of this chaos and carry it towards its natural completion.

The plagues in the Apocalypse demonstrate a similar pattern of "creation gone berserk." In the bowl sequence, the sun scorches with excessive heat and the world descends into utter and complete darkness. Rivers dry up. Islands flee. Mountains disappear. Great hailstones fall from the sky. All of these indicate the disruption and disintegration of the created order. But the plagues here do not disrupt just *any* world. They deconstruct the *Roman* world. The first plague strikes at the centre of Roman imperial hegemony, targeting with sores any who bear the mark of the beast and worship its image (16:2). The second plague strikes the sea, which is the economic base of Rome (16:3, note the destruction of ships in 8:9). The third plague turns rivers and fountains to blood, reflecting the blood Rome has spilled (16:6). The sixth plague strikes at the heart of the security apparatus: the Euphrates dries up, allowing incursions by the Parthian army from the east.²⁸ Even while creation regresses as a direct consequence of Rome's policies (the significance of a promised "new heaven and new earth" comes into view at this point), Rome

²⁶ Terrance E. Fretheim, "The Plagues as Ecological Signs of Historical Disaster," *JBL* 110.3 (1991): 385-396.

²⁷ Fretheim, "Ecological Signs," 394-5.

²⁸ Blount, *Revelation*, 302.

itself is being dismantled. The Apocalypse makes connections from the Exodus memory to the present social world.

The plague sequence creates visionary space for John's hearers to interpret their social world with a new set of eyes. By making the link to Pharaoh, John's hearers are forced to consider that Rome may not be benevolent as believed by many, but instead may better fit the typology of the "imperial realit[ies] that had plagued the people of God since the days of slavery in Egypt."²⁹ Identifying Rome as being under God's judgment leads to quite a different valuation of the empire and one's place within it. The logic called for is no longer to buy in and settle down (the logic of participation), but to oppose and get out (the logic of resistance).

At several points, John takes creative liberties with the Exodus motif. He incorporates other texts. He forges links to his social context. This is not an issue in memory analysis in the same way it is for those wanting to understand "John's use of the Old Testament" from an exegetical perspective. There are enough markers along the way that make a clear connection to the Exodus memory, even while creative liberties are frequently taken. The use of this motif is not ultimately exegetical but evocative: John brings the full weight of the Exodus memory to bear on present circumstances, not to exegete Exodus, but so that Exodus might exegete Rome.³⁰

The rhetorical goal seems to be that the listening community would re-inhabit the Exodus narrative as their own defining narrative: that they would take up this memory that is at the heart of Hebrew tradition, and become themselves an "Exodus people." This intent is emphasized at two points: one, that God "made us a Kingdom of Priests" (1:6), pointing to the designation of the liberated community of Israel at Sinai (19:6). Two, the imperative at 18:4, "come out of her,

²⁹ Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, 121. Similarly, Fekkes sees that John goes deeper than borrowing imagery from the Exodus tradition. "John sees the Roman emperor and his empire as the spiritual reincarnation of Pharaoh and Egypt..." (*Isaiah*, 81).

³⁰ Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 175.

my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues” (18:4), which is really the climactic moment of the Exodus motif. The Apocalypse envisions that the listening community, “my people,” would become a people who depart from empire.

The Divine Warrior

Patrick Miller has identified the Divine Warrior as an “epic tradition” that also lies at the heart of Hebrew theology.³¹ The vision of God as “man of war” overlaps with the Exodus – the song of the sea is one of the central texts proclaiming, “YHWH is a warrior” – but it is also a distinct strand of thought in its own right. This “epic tradition” at the heart of Hebrew theology, much like the Exodus, also lies at the heart of the Apocalypse.³²

The “textual monuments” that mark the presence of the Divine Warrior in the Apocalypse include: the promise to “make war” (2:16), the theme of conquer, the theme of wrath (6:16), gathering an army (14:1-5), and riding a white horse to “tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God” (19:15). We have seen previously that 14:1-5 envisions an army of 144,000 standing with the Lamb on Mount Zion. The vision of holy war is echoed in a similar vision of 144,000 in 7:4-8, complete with a census enumerating the number who have been “sealed.” This census of the tribes of Israel strongly suggests gathering an army to fight.³³ The primary mediator of the war motif is, however, the use of Ps 2 (see 2:26-27, 6:15, 11:15, 18, 12:5, 19:15), which envisions God’s anointed taking his place on Mount Zion (Ps 2:6), prepared to conquer any opposing him (Ps 2:7-9).

It would seem that this memory of the Divine Warrior functions similarly in the Apocalypse to the Exodus memory. The listening community is encouraged to place itself within

³¹ Patrick D. Miller Jr., *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

³² For further on the messianic war, see Bauckham, “The Apocalypse as a Christian War Scroll” in *Climax*, 210-37. See also Blount, *Revelation*, 144-48.

³³ Bauckham, *Climax*, 217.

the conflict narrative as participants in the story: they are warriors in the Lamb's army (14:1-5). The question of synergism comes to the fore here, whether the Divine Warrior fights alone, or whether the Divine Warrior leads an army who join YHWH in battle.³⁴ It would appear in the Apocalypse that a synergistic option is chosen – the Lamb is recruiting an army from among his followers to join the battle.³⁵ Yet these followers are not to take up the sword (13:10) and their commander fights with a sword that “issues from his mouth” (19:15). Further, no actual battle scenes are depicted; we have only the one riding a white horse, who has blood staining his garments *before* any fighting has begun (19:13). Is it the warrior's own blood, connecting back to the vision of the Lamb who achieves victory through being slaughtered?³⁶

John has taken creative liberty with the Divine Warrior to let loose of a host of evocative connections while also modifying its ethical outcome. The themes that are central to the memory of the Divine Warrior – salvation, judgment, kingship, victory³⁷ – all remain intact. The Divine Warrior is a conqueror. But the action called for, modeled by the warrior for his army, is a subversion of warfare: victory is obtained through active, engaged, nonviolent resistance rather than taking up the sword. At once the Apocalypse enlists the listening community into this narrative of holy war, while also changing the meaning of holy war by putting the Divine Warrior memory into conversation with the Lamb memory. There is no doubt that a synergistic option is chosen; discipleship means joining the Lamb's battle against the dragon and the beast. But this peculiar battle is fought through tactics of active, nonviolent resistance.

³⁴ Miller, *Divine Warrior*, 156.

³⁵ On synergism in the Apocalypse, see also Collins, “Political Perspective,” 247-48. Collins argues, “the story does not advocate or reinforce a program of active resistance or even self-defense [...] The conception of the final holy war is similar to that of Daniel, where the people will participate in the new order brought about by the eschatological battle but not in the battle itself.” I have disagreed with her on this point of passivity (see chapter 2), though I agree with her rejection of *violent* resistance or revolt. She has not considered the option of engaged, active, nonviolent resistance to the beast, which appears here to be also the mode of the Lamb.

³⁶ Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 182-85.

³⁷ Miller, *Divine Warrior*, 173.

Oracles against the nations

While the whole of the Apocalypse is a sustained critique against Roman imperial power, there are two sections in particular where this prophetic critique comes to the fore. One is at 13:1-14:5, which we have already seen is modeled on Daniel's critique of four empires. The second is at Rev 17-18, where the dominant symbol is that of Babylon (16:19, 17:5, 18:2, 18:10, 18:21; also 14:8). Babylon is another weighty symbol that occupies a privileged place in Israel's memory.³⁸ Between Daniel's vision of four empires and the Hebrew prophets' critique of Babylon, memory dominates also the prophetic critique of Rome in the Apocalypse.

While Babylon is the only power explicitly named in Rev 17-18, there are in fact two strands of tradition being woven together at this point. Babylon in the prophetic tradition is an archetypal representative of political hubris or "arrogance" that leads to violence (Isa 13:11, Jer 50:31-32).³⁹ The second political entity named, equally formative in terms of the texts brought to bear in this section, is the great sea-faring empire of Tyre. Tyre is the archetypal figure for the "wisdom of trade" that fosters pride in self-sufficient wealth (Ezek 28:5-7), and is critiqued for economic exploitation of distant lands, "trade filled with violence" (Ezek 28:16).⁴⁰ Tyre lays behind the image of the great harlot (17:1) and also the list of cargoes (18:11-13). Combining these motifs, the Apocalypse "sees a connection between Rome's economic affluence, Rome's idolatrous self-deification, and Rome's military and political brutality."⁴¹ In the same way that Rome is envisioned as a sum total of all four of Daniel's empires (13:2), so here John gathers up all the major oracles of prophetic judgment against Babylon and Tyre and forges a combined critique directed against Rome.

³⁸ See Walter Brueggemann, "At the Mercy of Babylon: A Subversive Rereading of the Empire," *JBL* 110/1 (1991): 3-22.

³⁹ Rev 17-18 includes Isa 13-14, 21:1-10, 47:1-15, Jer 25:12-38, and 50-51 (Fekkes, *Isaiah*, 87-88).

⁴⁰ Rev 17-18 includes Isa 23:1-18 and Ezek 26-29 (Fekkes, *Isaiah*, 90-91).

⁴¹ Bauckham, *Climax*, 349.

Unlike the examples above where Hebrew memory was a way of reminding the hearing community about formative narratives that they are to re-inhabit and perform, here there is no performative aspect. Evoking the prophetic oracles against the nations is not directly a program for action. Instead, the memory of Babylon (and Tyre) has the effect of providing a “mnemonic cipher” into the reality of Rome’s power. It names that Rome is really like Babylon, the archetypal figure of hubris and violence that dominates Hebrew memory. These memories provide language and symbol to revision the world, to peer through the anesthetizing lure of imperial spectacle and myth and see Rome from a different vantage point. Hebrew memory provides a vantage point to peer into the world from outside Rome’s totalizing hegemonic discourse.

To name Rome as Babylon and Tyre is also to engage in a war of myths. Rome’s ultimate deception is named in 18:7: her belief that no end will come, indeed that no end is possible. She is enamored with her own myth of *eternitas*: “A queen I sit, I am no widow, mourning I shall never see.” Yet the memory of Babylon permits no such fantasy (18:8//Isa 47:7-9). The memory of Babylon is a subversive memory, which pronounces an end even for Rome, even in late first century at the height of the empire’s influence in Asia Minor.

III. Remembering Jesus

A fourth strand of memory that shapes the Apocalypse, the final one we will consider here, is of course the Jesus tradition. Bultmann famously suggested that the Apocalypse lacks any meaningful connection to Christian memory: that it is a form of “weakly Christianized Judaism.”⁴² Granted, there is little evidence that the Apocalypse has interest in traditions about Jesus beyond his death, resurrection, and role as messianic warrior. We find nothing about teachings or healings; there is little that echoes the agricultural metaphors of Jesus’ parables with

⁴² Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner, 1955), 2:175.

their rural Palestinian roots. In spite of this, the Lamb is a significant figure in the Apocalypse. We are compelled to inquire about the extent to which the memory of Jesus shapes John's composition, and to what end.

The stunning introduction of the Lamb comes at 5:5-6. To this point, Jesus has been introduced in the Apocalypse as "faithful witness, firstborn of the dead, and ruler of the kings on earth" (1:5), all titles of power. He has dictated seven "prophetic oracles" to the *ekklesiai* in Rev 2 and 3, appearing there as a figure of authority and judgment over the churches. The moniker "Lamb" waits until this strategic moment to be unveiled.

What unfolds before John's eyes in this scene is at first a moment of pathos. An angel puts forward a question: "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" (5:2) Because no one is found worthy to open the seals, John "weeps much." But then John is shown one who is worthy: "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals" (5:5). John turns to see this promised Lion, whom the reader has already encountered as one vested with power and great authority. But when John turns, he sees not a lion, but a Lamb standing "as though it has been slain" (5:6). This is a vision designed to shock and astonish. The contrast between *expecting a lion* and *seeing a slaughtered lamb* has to be an intentional dialectic on John's part. Loren Johns suggests this dialectic "lies at the theological heart of the Apocalypse."⁴³ Going forward, the lion will not appear again. The Lamb will appear twenty eight times in reference to Jesus (and once in 13:11, in reference to the beast who is a parody of Jesus) and becomes the most frequently used Christological title in the Apocalypse.⁴⁴

⁴³ Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 159.

⁴⁴ Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 352.

Where do these symbols come from? The symbol of the Lion of Judah originates in Gen 49:9; the Root of David in Isa 11. Both are, according to Richard Bauckham, *loci classici* of Jewish messianic hopes in John's time.⁴⁵ 4 Ezra 11-12 (part of 4 Ezra's four-kingdom vision modeled, like the Apocalypse, on Dan 7) envisions a lion who reproves and destroys the great eagle, which represents the power of Rome. Similarly, a scroll at Qumran reads: "you [the Messiah] shall be as a lion; and you shall not lie down until you have devoured the prey which naught shall deliver..." (1QSb 5:29). The lion, Bauckham concludes, suggests ferocity, destructiveness, and irresistible strength that manifest themselves against powerful political enemies. In contrast, a slaughtered lamb hardly summons images of ferocity and strength.

The origin of the Lamb symbol is more complex. There are many lambs in the Hebrew scriptures; none are conquerors. Bauckham suggests that there is no substantial evidence in pre-Christian Judaism showing that the Lamb was already established as a symbol of the messianic conqueror.⁴⁶ Loren Johns agrees that "there is no evidence at this point to establish the existence of anything like a recognizable redeemer-lamb figure in the apocalyptic traditions of early Judaism."⁴⁷ John has quite possibly forged here *a new symbol* based in a memory of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.⁴⁸

How then should we understand the Lamb symbol? We must first discuss two potential antecedents to clear the way for new understanding. First, in contemporary Christian discourse, the slaughtered lamb of the Apocalypse is often linked to an atonement theology – as though the

⁴⁵ Bauckham, *Climax*, 180-82. Cf. also Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, 60.

⁴⁶ Bauckham, *Climax*, 183.

⁴⁷ Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 106.

⁴⁸ Johns considers the Apocalypse's use of τὸ ἀρνίον in relation to (a) the lambs of the sacrificial system, (b) the Paschal lamb of Exodus, (c) the lamb in the suffering servant song of Isa 53:7, (d) Daniel's vision of a ram and a goat (Dan 8), (e) the *Aqedah* (Gen 22), (f) the lambs of Micah 5:6, and (g) the lambs of eschatological peace. That τὸ ἀρνίον appears only once in the NT outside of the Apocalypse (Jn 21:15), and infrequently in the LXX, raises questions about a broader model that the Apocalypse may draw on. In each case, Johns finds compelling linguistic and exegetical reasons why the Lamb of 5:6 cannot be based on these prior texts (*Lamb Christology*, 127-55).

lamb of the Apocalypse is the same “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (Jn 1:29). While there are some hints of expiatory sacrifice (1:5, 5:9-10), these appear not to dominate.⁴⁹ Instead, slaughter (σφάζω) is applied to people also (6:4, 6:9, 18:24), and serves no expiatory function there. The language for the Lamb is also different, finding not the traditional “blameless” or “spotless” ἄμνὸς ἄμωμος but simply τὸ ἁγνίον. The expiatory function, if it is present in the symbol, is not a dominant one.

The second antecedent that often comes to mind is the Lamb as Passover victim.⁵⁰ This fits well with the Exodus motif of the Apocalypse. Unlike the atonement motif, which lacks any substantial development in the Apocalypse, we have seen that the Exodus is one of its central themes. Additionally, Jesus is elsewhere understood in the NT as the Passover victim (1Cor 5:7), though John may not have been aware of this text. There is therefore substantial prior tradition of Jesus as Passover victim linking nicely with the Exodus motif of the Apocalypse. However, Johns points to some weaknesses:⁵¹ though the Exodus is a theme, there is no Passover festival specifically named in the Apocalypse. The expected term for the Passover victim (πάσχα) is nowhere to be found. And most substantially, the Passover victim in Ex 12:5 is not necessarily a lamb. It could be a sheep or a goat, and therefore a young kid as well.

I am not convinced with Johns that the Passover theme should be dismissed so easily given the controlling narrative of the Exodus. He is certainly right that the Passover victim does not *sufficiently* explain the Lamb symbol. If we take seriously the dramatic setting of the Lamb’s introduction in 5:5-6, the meaning of the symbol must surely account for the utter and complete surprise when John expects a lion and sees instead a slaughtered lamb. The meaning is held in

⁴⁹ Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 130. Blount (*Revelation*, 109) and Yeatts (*Revelation*, 115-16) both follow Johns, seeing no atonement theology in the symbol of the Lamb. Against Aune, who sees allusions to an expiatory sacrifice (*Revelation 1-5*, 353).

⁵⁰ Bauckham, *Climax*, 184; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, 60-61.

⁵¹ cf. Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 130-33.

the contrast, even while it may be filled out by broader traditions such as the Passover victim. What must be in view, therefore, given the presence of the lion as a fearsome predator, is the lamb's defenseless vulnerability. The symbol of the Lamb speaks finally of vulnerability in the face of overwhelming terror, of "violence endured but not inflicted" to borrow David Barr's excellent phrase.⁵² This conclusion is shared by Johns, though he gets there differently.⁵³

This is not to say that the Lamb of the Apocalypse is weak or powerless. Quite to the contrary, this is a Lamb who conquers (5:5-6, 12:11, 17:14, 19:15). "If vulnerability is in view," Johns writes, "it can only be a gutsy, costly, and effective kind of vulnerability;"⁵⁴ and Blount, similarly, "[the Lamb] conquers through predatory weakness."⁵⁵ The messianic warrior does not disappear completely from view. Instead, the Lion's way in the world and its strategy for overcoming evil and conquering the Beast is redefined through the symbol of the slaughtered Lamb, who conquers through defenseless vulnerability. The symbol is guided by the memory of Jesus' death.⁵⁶

What then are the implications of the Lamb vision? I suggest two. First, the vision of the Lamb is ultimately a vision of the way God works in the world.⁵⁷ The Apocalypse is, after all, the "unveiling of Jesus Christ" (1:1). When the Apocalypse is read through this lens, is it possible that God's judgment is not finally affected through violence inflicted but through violence endured? While such a discussion is well beyond the scope of this thesis, surely any

⁵² Barr, *Tales*, 126.

⁵³ Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 145.

⁵⁴ Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 149.

⁵⁵ Blount sees that the slaughtered Lamb is *how* the messiah, pictured in the Lion, manifests itself in the world. "'Slaughtered Lamb', then, is not so much a descriptive, static noun as it is a paradoxical, action verb. Though John's lion is a powerful conqueror, it would not be right to say that this lion '*hunts* its prey.' The more appropriate language would be something like 'this lion *slaughtered-Lambs* (*sLambs*) its prey.' [...] The weak Lamb, then, does not subvert the powerful lion; the Lamb's weakness, its slaughter, is precisely the way the lion works out its power. The lion *sLambs* God's opposition" (Blount, *Revelation*, 117).

⁵⁶ cf. Barr, "Symbolic Transformation," 41.

⁵⁷ cf. Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 163.

discussion of the “problem” of violence in the Apocalypse must account for the Lamb who conquers not through predatory violence but through vulnerability.⁵⁸

Second, and more direct to our point, the memory of Jesus’ death, encoded in the symbol of the Lamb, is at its heart an ethical vision. It provides a model for how the Lamb’s followers will participate in the Lamb’s work of ‘conquering’ (2:7, 11, 17, 26, 3:5, 12, 22); that is, of overcoming the beast. They are to ‘conquer’ as the Lamb has ‘conquered.’ The task at hand is costly witness and consistent resistance. Death or suffering could follow as this witness awakes the wrath of the beast. The memory of the Lamb functions as a vision of death embraced and transformed: it is ethically paradigmatic for the alternative community.

IV. Conclusions

We have seen that the Apocalypse invokes the core defining narratives of Jewish and Christian memory. This memory offers a new way of seeing the world, and it also places the hearing community as actors in these narratives. The Exodus is happening again; the Messiah is looking for an army; the Lamb’s victory is shared by those who follow in his path of active witness characterized by defenseless vulnerability. Through these themes, the Apocalypse draws its hearers into the ancient story-world of the scriptures; they find there a new vision for the world, and a way to become actors in the ongoing story. Equally, memory in the Apocalypse confronts the discourse of empire in important ways:

- *eternitas* is confronted by the pronouncement of ends
- *pax* is confronted by the reality of Babylon’s violence and the presence of chaos
- *victory* is confronted by the Lamb’s vulnerability
- *the logic of participation* is confronted by a call to nonconformity and departure

⁵⁸ For one scholar’s perspective on the issue of violence in Revelation, see Yoder Neufeld, *Killing Enmity*, 123-35. A substantial bibliography is provided.

Thus products of social memory function in the Apocalypse to confront the ideologies of empire, to draw hearers into an alternative vision of the world, and to transform the listening community into actors of the “old story” of discipleship. John urges his hearers to take up these stories as their own, because they are the story of how God acts in history through a holy people. They are lifelines to a life of fidelity and wisdom in a world dominated by imperial hegemony.

Chapter 5: ‘And they Sang a New Song’ Social Memory and the Heavenly Liturgy

Aside from the question of genre, two features distinguish the Apocalypse from other New Testament writings. The first is its incessant allusions to the Hebrew scriptures. These stories of a distinctively Hebrew memory define the work, as we have seen. A second feature is the prevalence of worship, including both admonitions and visions of heavenly liturgy. Building on the conceptualization of social memory as a matter of both *products* and *processes*, this chapter places worship within the framework of memory and ritual. I argue that worship in the Apocalypse provides a commemorative setting with a dual purpose. It challenges power, and it builds an alternative community. I draw on Victor Turner’s work to demonstrate that much like a rite-of-passage, worship in the Apocalypse *dis-places* the worshipping community from the world as defined by empire, and *re-replaces* the worshipping community in a qualitatively different world storied through memory.

I. Liturgical Setting of the Apocalypse

I begin with the claim that the Apocalypse is liturgical in both content and setting. The hymns are clear markers of liturgical content in the Apocalypse, as are other elements such as ceremonials involving crowns (4:10), offerings of incense (8:3-4), and golden bowls poured out from the temple (15:7-8). Perhaps less obvious, but of paramount importance for our purposes, is the setting where the Apocalypse is destined for reading. The instructions provided in the prologue of the Apocalypse provide some hints. They read, “blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear” (1:3). This implies that the Apocalypse is to be read aloud within a gathered community, identified and addressed as “the seven *ekklesiai* that are in Asia” (1:4). Further, we can discern that the most likely occasion for reading the Apocalypse is “on the Lord’s day” (1:10) when the local assemblies gathered. Taken together, it

is highly probable that much like letters of Paul that were read aloud to the gathered assembly, the Apocalypse is destined to be read within the local worship gathering.¹

A growing consensus of studies affirms this liturgical setting for the Apocalypse. Other compelling possibilities arise from here, but are less certain. Leonard Thompson argues that in this liturgical setting, “reading and listening to the Book of Revelation are themselves liturgical acts in the worship life of Christians in western Asia Minor [...] the book itself becomes liturgical material for the churches.”² The Apocalypse is not only material to be read at some point when the community is gathered; in Thompson’s view, the Apocalypse forms part of the worship service. The composition itself can function as liturgical material.³

A second compelling possibility comes from David Barr, who suggests that the Apocalypse was performed during the Lord’s Supper.⁴ He observes first that Eucharistic images pervade the Apocalypse (eating and drinking, wine and blood, manna, grain harvest and grape harvest), as well as Eucharistic language (“we give you thanks [εὐχαριστοῦμεν]” – 11:17, “the marriage supper of the Lamb” – 19:9). He observes also strong parallels between John’s composition and a Eucharist service preserved in the *Didache*. I would add to Barr’s observations the sustained focus on the slaughtered Lamb, echoing a key element of the Eucharist rite. It is possible therefore that the Apocalypse prepares hearers to receive the Eucharist at the Lord’s banquet table, culminating at 19:9 with “Blessed are those invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb” and at 22:17 “And let him who is thirsty come, let him who

¹ See, for example, Jean Pierre Ruiz, “Betwixt and Between on the Lord’s Day: Liturgy and the Apocalypse,” in *The Reality of the Apocalypse*, ed. David L. Barr (Atlanta: SBL, 2006): 221-41; David L. Barr, “The Apocalypse of John as Oral Enactment,” *Interpretation* 40 (1986): 243-56.

² Leonard Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 72.

³ Ruiz argues, for example, that the seven messages (Rev 2-3) are examples of ritual, with their highly consistent and repetitive structure (“Betwixt and Between,” 234-40).

⁴ David L. Barr, “The Apocalypse of John as Oral Enactment,” *Interpretation* 40 (1986): 253-55; also, Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 179.

desires take the water of life without price.” If Barr is correct, this has compelling implications for us, because the Eucharist is an important commemorative rite – “Do this, for my *anamnesis*.” The Apocalypse fills out the meaning of the Eucharist by linking the Lord’s Supper with calls for suffering and costly witness.⁵ Such witness re-members (literally, gives body to) the memory of the Lamb who offers his own body to be broken for the healing of the nations.

While the setting of the Lord’s Supper remains a suggestive possibility and one we will keep in mind in relation to the topic of this chapter, the evidence is not quite strong enough to reach a definitive conclusion. We do not have a sufficiently clear window into the liturgical patterns of early Christian communities to sufficiently compare the liturgical material of the Apocalypse with real examples. We best not press too far, then, beyond the likelihood that the Apocalypse as a whole functions as liturgical material for the worship of the gathered *ekklesiai*, and this liturgy bears a strong mark of Hebrew memory as discussed in our previous chapter.

II. Modeling “Proper” Worship

Proper worship is a primary concern of the Apocalypse. The verb προσκυνέω occurs twenty-two times, with worship offered to God, to the beast, to idols, and to angels. We previously saw that the choice to worship God or the beast is a primary choice facing disciples (13:1-14:5), and this choice is offered in the most urgent of terms. One can worship God, or the beast, but there is no compromise position where it is possible to worship God while also retaining the sense of economic and social security available to worshippers of the beast. Similarly in 9:20, John mourns a recalcitrant humanity unwilling to renounce its “codependence” with empire. Facing ecological calamity, these tragically “did not give up worshipping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which can neither see nor hear nor

⁵ Friesen writes, “In effect, he was defining how communion should be understood through his narrative. The ritual of the Lord’s Supper would confirm the mythology that John laid out” (*Imperial Cult*, 179).

walk.” This critique over misdirected worship eventually turns upon John himself, who twice falls in worship at the feet of the angel who has accompanied his visionary journey (19:10, 22:8-9). The angel protests firmly in both instances: “You must not do that! Worship God!” The Apocalypse envisions many roads that lead to misdirected worship and strong hegemonic pressures pushing in that direction.

We should understand, therefore, that proper worship represents an urgent task for John’s audience. This is captured most directly at the climax of Babylon’s fall, where a voice from the throne issues an imperative that reverberates throughout the whole of John’s composition: “Praise our God, all you his servants, and all who fear him, small and great” (19:5). The Apocalypse calls for proper worship of God on one hand: on the other, it offers scenes of heavenly liturgy in the form of the hymnic units. It should probably be understood that these scenes of worship are not only *illustrative* but also *demonstrative*: John is showing the *ekklesiai* the kind of worship they ought to adopt.

That the heavenly liturgy is a model for the liturgy of earthly communities is made clear in the expanding circle of participation during the first scene (Rev 4-5). Worship begins with four living creatures singing day and night (4:8); it expands to include twenty-four elders falling before the throne (4:10). Next, the four living creatures and twenty-four elders sing together “a new song” (5:9). They are joined by many angels, “myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands” (5:11). Finally, worship encompasses “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea” (5:13). The liturgy is meant to move out from the throne room of God to encompass the whole of created reality, drawing in even those “on earth” who walk the streets of Asia Minor.

III. Hymns of the Heavenly Liturgy

The Apocalypse offers not only admonitions for proper worship, but also visions of worship as it unfolds in the heavenly throne room. In all, the Apocalypse has seven scenes of heavenly worship. Hymns are a major feature, though we also find, for example, liturgical action (8:3-5) and liturgical silence (8:1). There are in total nine hymnic units.⁶ Of these nine hymns, seven follow an antiphonal call-and-response pattern (4:8-11, 5:9-14, 7:9-12, 11:15-18, 16:5-7, 19:1-4, 19:5-8) while two are voiced as a single unit (12:10-12, 15:3-4). Broadly speaking, in the first half of the Apocalypse (Rev 4-11) the hymns focus on themes of power and worthiness to exercise power. They articulate God and the Lamb's worthiness to rule the nations, and culminate in a hymn of thanksgiving, "We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty, who are and who were, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign" (11:17). Hymns of the second half (Rev 12-22) turn to concerns of judgment and justice. The justice of God is celebrated in the heavenly throne room while God's victory over the beast is enacted. With each liturgical scene, John's audience not only sees "what must take place" (4:1) in the dramatic unfolding of the eschatological narrative. The audience "overhears" the liturgies of heaven that accompany the unfolding of apocalyptic events.

The origin of these hymns has been widely discussed. Some believe that John has taken familiar hymns that were already sung by early Christian communities and incorporated these hymns into his composition. If that were the case, these songs would provide a comforting and familiar reassurance to his audience in the midst of an otherwise tumultuous series of visions. However, it is not clear that John's aim has been to comfort, but rather to provoke. The

⁶ The precise number varies depending on how one counts. Blount (*Revelation*, 95) identifies nine hymns, while Aune identifies fifteen ("The Influence of the Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John," *Papers of the Chicago Society of Biblical Research* 28 [1983]: 15). Both, however, work with the same textual units. They simply enumerate the hymns differently, particularly the call-and-response pattern.

Apocalypse voices not the reassurance of a shepherd but the fiery rhetoric of a prophet urgently calling his people to reject idolatry and embrace a radical witness. Fitting with this rhetorical purpose, the hymns are best “overheard” not as songs of comfort, but as songs of protest and dissent. They have what would be for contemporary communities of faith, as for John’s own audience, an uncomfortable political edge. Despite earlier claims to the contrary, it would appear that these hymns are not familiar songs sung regularly by the gathered *ekklesiai*, but are instead original compositions suited to the author’s rhetorical purpose.⁷ We might say that these songs are intended to *interrupt* the worship of the earthly *ekklesiai* within the setting of their worship service, with visions of what “proper” worship looks like.⁸

IV. Ritual and Liminality

The sociological categories of ritual and liminality are both helpful for the analysis of this chapter. Ritual is commonly understood as “symbolic behaviour that is socially standardized and repetitive.”⁹ It is generally regarded by theorists not as rote routine, but as an active process of “constructing” and “performing” the social group. Roy Rappaport writes, “when one performs a ritual, one not only constructs oneself but also participates in the construction of a larger public order.”¹⁰

Rituals are related to articulating and reinforcing particular worldviews and ethical norms. Clifford Geertz sees ritual as a place where the connection is made through dense symbols between life-practice and cosmology. He writes, “religious symbols formulate a basic congruence between a particular style of life and a specific (if, most often, implicit) metaphysic,

⁷ Aune, “Influence,” 14; *Revelation 1-5*, 316.

⁸ Yoder Neufeld, *Killing Emnity*, 134-35.

⁹ David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 9.

¹⁰ Roy A. Rappaport, “Concluding Comments on Ritual and Reflexivity,” *Semiotica* 30 (1980): 137.

and in so doing sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other.”¹¹ In ritual, “the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same world.”¹² In the case of the imperial cults of Asia Minor, we saw that ritual reinforced a vision of how the world is structured; it enacted the special relationship believed to exist between the emperor and the gods. Ritual constructed the reality of the Roman empire.¹³

Victor Turner’s concept of ritual liminality draws an analogy between ritual and rites-of-passage. Drawing on the work of Arnold van Gennep, Turner sees that rites-of-passage follow three phases: (1) separation from the social group, (2) an intervening “liminal” (threshold) period outside the regular structures of society, and (3) reintegration.¹⁴ Liminality on a rite-of-passage is a period of standing “betwixt and between” the world as it was left behind, and the world as it will be. Liminal space often reflects a breakdown of regular social hierarchies and expectations, and is often “the scene and time for the emergence of a society’s deepest values in the form of sacred dramas and objects.”¹⁵ Ritual can facilitate this kind of “liminal space,” at some distance from regular social life. I now give attention to the patterns of separation and reintegration in the heavenly liturgy.

V. Separation: Hymns of Politics and Protest

a. The heavenly liturgy is profoundly and unapologetically political. On a surface reading, the heavenly liturgy appears quite benign. Elders fall down and give glory to God. Worship focuses on the worthiness of God and the Lamb, with little mention of anything else. “Salvation belongs to our God,” one reads quite innocently (7:10). “Hallelujah, the Lord our God

¹¹ Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 90.

¹² Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 133.

¹³ Price, *Ritual and Power*, 248.

¹⁴ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 94.

¹⁵ Turner, “Liminality and the Performative Genres,” in *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle*, 21.

the Almighty reigns!” (19:6). Read in isolation, these do not appear to be cries of revolution, but routine spiritualized language of worship and adoration.

Yet terms like salvation, glory, and power are hardly innocent in a work that envisions a cosmic struggle between the kingdom of the Lamb and the empire of the Beast. As Schüssler Fiorenza has argued, the liturgical language of the Apocalypse must not be understood in isolation, and it must not be understood in strictly “spiritual” terms. Liturgical language has political context and meaning.¹⁶ When a great multitude cries out “salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb” (7:10), this cry is voiced in a political context that has acclaimed Augustus and his successors as saviors of the world. The attentive reader hears in the liturgy the implicit polemic, “salvation belongs to our God, *and to nobody else*.” The liturgy names something that is profoundly true about the world as heaven sees it.

We can cite other examples. The claim that God “created all things, and by [God’s] will they existed and were created” (4:11) expands visionary horizons in a world that proclaims the birth of Augustus as equal to the beginning of all things.¹⁷ Yet the heavenly liturgy claims it is God who created all this, it is God “who was and who is” and who reaches back to the beginning of time (4:8). The liturgical confrontation between God and beast becomes slightly more obvious when angels and elders and living creatures sing, “blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever!” (7:12) Another implicit “to our God *alone*, and to nobody else” is rightly heard here, particularly in relation to the language of power.¹⁸ And if there remains any doubt that battle lines are being drawn in the

¹⁶ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, 101-2.

¹⁷ Of Augustus, it was said, “A person could justly consider this to be the beginning of life and existence.” See prior chapter.

¹⁸ The song is instigated by the countless multitude clothed in white. White clothing in the Apocalypse is a symbol of having conquered through faithful witness and righteous deeds – that is, of having allied oneself to the Lamb and not to the beast (3:2-5, 19:8). This group is well aware of what power means, and of the choice to give power and honour to God or to give it to the emperor instead. See Blount, *Revelation*, 150.

liturgy, we reach this climax to the hymnody of the first half of the Apocalypse: “the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever” (11:15). Here the conflict between kingdoms is in plain view.

David Aune has undertaken a formal analysis of the political character of the heavenly liturgy.¹⁹ In addition to noticing hymnic language that has political implications,²⁰ Aune examines the liturgical action involving the twenty-four elders in 4:10-11. Each time the four living creatures finish a fresh iteration of their eternal *trisagion* (thrice-holy), the twenty-four elders prostrate themselves before the throne and cast forth their golden crowns. “Gold crowns were frequently presented to Roman emperors for a variety of reasons; this practice was inherited from Hellenistic kingship tradition,” Aune writes.²¹ In particular, conquered rulers after their defeat were summoned to visit the throne of the emperor. Here they would prostrate themselves before the emperor and present their crowns as a symbol of subordination and homage.²² The throne room vision is a political cartoon of the imperial ceremony: it reduces what happens around the emperor’s throne to a weak imitation of the worship that never ceases day and night around the heavenly throne. Aune concludes, “the result is that the sovereignty of God and the Lamb have been elevated so far above all pretension and claims of earthly rulers that the latter, upon comparison, become only pale, even diabolical imitations of the transcendent majesty of the King of kings and Lord of lords.”²³

This is counter-liturgy at its finest. On the one hand, there is no question where the focus of worship in the Apocalypse lies. These are not songs about empire: they are songs about God

¹⁹ See Aune, “Influence,” which has been further developed in *Revelation 1-5*, 314-17 and in the commentary corresponding to each text.

²⁰ Aune finds the following shared language between imperial hymns composed in honour of the emperor, and the hymns of Revelation: holy one, holy, glory, salvation, authority, power and authority, worthy to receive power, righteous are your judgments, our God the Almighty, our Lord and God (*Revelation 1-5*, 316-17).

²¹ Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 308.

²² Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 308.

²³ Aune, “Influence,” 22.

and the Lamb. But the hymns interact with the political context to make theological claims that have very specific political implications. Without ever mentioning Rome or Caesar, without ever shifting focus away from the throne of God and the Lamb, the hymns of the Apocalypse have eroded Rome's claims to power and declared this power illegitimate. "Worship was more than merely the setting within which the Apocalypse was destined for reception by its audiences in the seven churches of Asia," Jean-Pierre Ruiz writes. "It was the staging area from which and on the basis of which John mounted his minority counterattack against the convincing claims of the cognitive majority."²⁴ No first century reader would be able to gloss over such obvious rhetoric.²⁵ The heavenly liturgy leaves its participants with discontent over the state of affairs in their social world.

b. The heavenly liturgy voices protest. The first scene of the heavenly liturgy (4:1-5:14) has at its centre an act – dare I say a *liturgical* act? – that signifies radical criticism of the status quo: John weeps (5:4).²⁶ He weeps because no one is found worthy to open the seven seals of the scroll held in the right hand of God. While the meaning of the scroll is uncertain, it is likely tied to a judicial role: the power to render judgment and execute justice.²⁷ The seals which are opened in 6:1-8 are best understood not as a sequence of new plagues unleashed upon the earth, but as revealing suffering that is already happening because of the nature of Roman power.²⁸ The four horsemen unleashed by the seals, for example, reveal (1) expansionist military policy, (2) internal civil strife (e.g. the Jewish war) that policies of domination have generated, (3) critique

²⁴ Jean Pierre Ruiz, "The Politics of Praise: A Reading of Revelation 19:1-10" *SBLSP* 1997: 381.

²⁵ Loren Johns writes, "Despite the success Constantinian Christianity has enjoyed in schooling readers to see [the language of Revelation] as 'spiritual,' the political critique inherent in this language could hardly have been missed by first-century readers. The language of kings, kingdoms, and reigning (the *basil*-word group) abounds in this book" (*Lamb Christology*, 152).

²⁶ Christopher C. Rowland, "The Book of Revelation," in *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 606. On weeping as social criticism, see also Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 39-57.

²⁷ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, 61.

²⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, 63.

of the imperial food economy that privileges the luxury of the centre over the subsistence of the periphery, and (4) suffering and death that flows from each of these policies. John's weeping draws attention to the ultimate dysfunction of empire: it does not have power to generate wise rulers, or anyone for that matter, capable of criticism. It cannot generate a vision of justice.

Pathos is again vocalized in the loud cry (καὶ ἔκραζαν φωνῇ μεγάλῃ λέγοντες) that rises up from the martyred witnesses taking shelter under the altar: "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?" While the cry "how long?" is not a hymn in any formal sense, it nonetheless voices a chief liturgical complaint found elsewhere.²⁹ It is an urgent cry designed to move God to action (Exod 2:23-25). Indeed, this is precisely what unfolds. Granted, the witnesses in 6:11 are told to "wait a little longer" before their cry is answered. Nonetheless their prayers are not lost – they are held with bowls of incense (5:8, 8:3) acting as a kind of sensory reminder before the throne of what is unfolding on earth.³⁰ The waiting comes to an end in the liturgical scene of 8:1-5, where the prayers of the saints, mingled together with incense, are poured out on the altar. This liturgical action unleashes the first set of judgments upon the inhabitants of the earth. The presence of a cry gives voice to the presence of pathos, which in turn becomes a liturgical offering that moves God to action. It is essential to the unfolding of events that someone has given voice to this cry.

Protest is offered in the act of weeping and an unyielding demand for justice. But what can be said of the hymns themselves? Brian Blount offers a fascinating comparative study that draws connections from the "spiritual-blues impulse" of the Black Church and Civil Rights

²⁹ For example, Zech 1:12, Pss 6:3, 35:17, 74:10, 79:5, 80:4, 89:46, 90:13, 94:3.

³⁰ The connection from the cry "how long?" to the "prayers of the saints" in 5:8 and 8:3 is held by Schüssler Fiorenza (*Vision*, 71), Aune (*Revelation 6-16*, 512-13), and Blount (*Revelation*, 164). Notably, it is not martyred witnesses who are the sacrificial offering in 8:1-5, but the content of their prayers (Blount, *Revelation*, 164).

traditions to the hymns of the Apocalypse.³¹ Blount demonstrates that the musical movements of the spirituals, gospel, blues, and rap each emerged as songs of endurance, hope, and resistance in a specific historical moment. Like the hymns of the Apocalypse, each of these movements emerges out of a context of oppressive economic, social, and political circumstances. Like the hymns of the Apocalypse, these genres hijack the language of dominant culture and subvert it, giving it a rebellious twist. From this comparative study, Blount concludes: “They are, all of them – spirituals, blues, gospel, rap, and the Revelation hymns – fighting music. They are, all of them, in their own way, rapping on Rome” (Rome is understood by Blount to encompass a broad range of domination, including racism).³²

Allan Boesak reflects similarly on the freedom struggle in South Africa, in relation to the heavenly liturgy: “Black people in South Africa have made freedom songs part of the struggle; in fact, the struggle is inconceivable without them... We sing because we believe, we sing because we hope. We sing because we know that it is only a little while, and the tyrant shall cease to exist.”³³ These are songs of freedom and hope; they are also songs of protest that can only be voiced once ties have been broken with “business as usual” in the social world. Applying Turner’s language, these hymns voice a movement towards dissent and separation.

V. Integration: Memory in the Heavenly Liturgy

a. The song of Moses and the Lamb (15:2-4). The song of Moses and the Lamb is the commemorative hymn *par excellence* of the Apocalypse. Straight from the epigraph, connections to the past are palpable: the epigraph reads, “the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb” (15:3), and it is sung by a choir of witnesses identified as victors, “those who have

³¹ Blount, *Can I Get a Witness?*, 91-117.

³² Blount, *Can I Get a Witness?*, 117.

³³ Allan A. Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse from a South African Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 60-61.

conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name.” The allusions to Exodus are strong and many. The link to Moses, the location at the seashore, the choir of victors, all recall and commemorate the Exodus story. The narrative context, located at 15:2-4, sits between the introduction of a “great and wonderful sign” of seven last plagues (15:1) and the pouring out of those plagues upon the earth (16:1). Through these links, a basic continuity is established between the present world of the *ekklesiai* under Rome and the past world of the Israelites under Pharaoh. The story of the Exodus is taken up and localized to the streets and landscapes of Roman Asia Minor.

The first part of the epigraph, “the song of Moses” recalls that venerable victory chant sung by the Israelites as they stand at the shore of the Red Sea (Exod 15:1-18). There these refugees of empire ponder the miracle of their escape from Egypt, the drowning of Pharaoh’s army, and the “great work” of salvation that YHWH has accomplished. “I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously,” the original song proclaims. “Horse and rider he has thrown into the sea” (Exod 15:1). The song stands at the fulcrum of the Israelites’ journey out of Egypt, celebrating “the victories – of unarmed, outnumbered, underequipped, or otherwise disadvantaged Israelites – attributed to ahistorical, wondrous circumstances, namely, the intervention of God in human affairs.”³⁴ This journey, as Carol Meyers notes, is also the journey towards Mount Sinai,³⁵ where Israel organizes its community life around a social vision that is alternative to life under Pharaoh.³⁶ It is an escape from Egypt but also a relearning of social life that is organized not by empire but by covenant faithfulness.

³⁴ Carol Meyers, *Exodus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 117.

³⁵ “Indeed, the song is as much a song of God’s holy mountain as it is a song of the sea” (Meyers, *Exodus*, 122).

³⁶ On early Israel as an anti-imperial community, see Norman K. Gottwald, “Early Israel as an Anti-Imperial Community,” in *In the Shadow of Empire*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008): 9-24.

The identification of the song with Moses follows largely from the epigraph. The degree to which the actual content of the song reflects the song in Exodus 15 is less clear. There are in fact several songs of Moses in the Hebrew scriptures: for example, Exodus 15:1-18, Deuteronomy 31:30-32:43, Isaiah 12:1-6, and Psalm 90. If John had a particular song in mind, it is difficult to tell, as the present hymn doesn't much resemble any of them.³⁷ Richard Bauckham suggests that John is engaging here in the rabbinic exegetical practice of *gezerâ sawâ*: using the key pivot verse Exod 15:11, he draws in a number of texts (Jer 10:6-7, Ps 86:8-10, and Ps 98:1-2) organized around the theme of God's incomparability ("who is like you?") and wondrous acts of deliverance ("doing wonders").³⁸ Gordon Fee sees likewise that John offers a "hymnic commentary" of Exod 15:11.³⁹ Others are less sure that this adequately explains the composition of the song. They see instead not a systemic commentary but "a broad cross-section of Old Testament texts that heralds a consensus about God's almighty and salvific stature."⁴⁰ In any case, we need not reach a definitive analysis of the song's composition here. It is enough to see that the song is deeply saturated with traditional materials in both attribution and content.⁴¹ Almost every word can be traced to a text from the Hebrew scriptures. The song draws poignant memories from the "old story" into the contemporary context.

The second part of the epigraph, "the song of the Lamb" (τὴν ᾠδὴν τοῦ ἀρνίου) is less straightforward, because unlike Moses we do not have examples of other "songs of the Lamb." Is it then a song *by* the Lamb (subjective genitive)? Or is it a song *about* or *to* the Lamb (objective genitive)? While it is possible that a hymn is being sung to the Lamb as the object of worship,

³⁷ "The song which follows is not connected in any literary way with the song of Moses in Exodus 15 or Deuteronomy 32, but is an amalgamation of various OT themes" (Schüssler Fiorenza, *Justice and Judgment*, 135).

³⁸ Bauckham, *Climax*, 302-5.

³⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *Revelation*, NCC (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), 212.

⁴⁰ Blount, *Revelation*, 287.

⁴¹ The parallels are delineated in Mitchell G. Reddish, *Revelation* (Macon: Smyth & Healways, 2001), 293.

the parallelism between “song of Moses” and “song of the Lamb” suggests the subjective meaning is more likely.⁴² As the Lamb stands with a singing army in 14:1-5, here the Lamb stands with Moses and with those who have conquered, to sing of God’s justice and salvific acts. In other words, the choir of witnesses joins in a song that Moses and the Lamb have already been singing. It is a potent image of solidarity between the present community of witnesses and these two important figures from the past. Nevertheless, the grammatical ambiguity leaves room for imaginative possibility so we are best not to press the point too far.

The song itself is structured as two parallel acclamations, a rhetorical question, and three reasons (ὅτι clauses). It asserts first of all that God’s works are “great” and “amazing” (μαγάλα και θαυμαστά τὰ ἔργα σου), alluding to the “great and amazing” sign of seven “last” plagues in 15:1. It asserts secondly that God’s ways (ὁδοί) are just and true. The concern is that God’s action through the plagues is seen and celebrated as an expression of God’s justice. The gruesome violence of dismantling Rome – whether real or just narrated as such – is not arbitrary, but is God’s definitive response to the cry of the slaughtered vulnerable (6:10). The song acclaims that judgment is to be anticipated and celebrated among God’s witnesses as good news. Judgment is not something the faithful are saved from but something through which they are in fact saved. However, what was good news for the Hebrews was not necessarily good news for Pharaoh, and what is good news for God’s witnesses and the slaughtered vulnerable is not necessarily good news for those enamoured with empire. The song, like so much else in the Apocalypse, requires from its hearers and performers a clarification of allegiances. It is at once celebration and taunt.

Three ὅτι clauses following the rhetorical question give reasons why God is to be feared and glorified. Each looks to traditional material for justification. One, because God (*alone*) has

⁴² Blount (*Revelation*, 286); against Aune (*Revelation 6-15*, 872-73)

been and is holy (Deut 32:4, Ps 86:8-10). Two, because the story stretching from Exodus through the prophets to the present day has always maintained that the nations will come to worship before God (Ps 86:9, Isa 2:2, Jer 16:19, Mal 1:11). Three, because God's judgments have been revealed as true and just, and they will be again (Ps 98:2). Each of these reasons reaches back into the sacred story. Because God has acted in the past, most visibly in the Exodus but also on other occasions drawn into the hymn by narrative links to the Hebrew scriptures, God can be counted on in the present. The assurance is that the costly witness borne by those resisting the beast will be vindicated. Recalling the past energizes bold and faithful action in the present. It is all that much bolder that the song voices its dissent late in the first century, at a time when Roman power is at its height.

There are three ways, then, that I understand this song. One, it is a remarkable act of imagination that envisions even at this historical moment, at the height of Roman power, defeat of the beast is both possible and near. It celebrates God's justice and is confident of God's presence when all evidence points to the opposite. Empire cannot generate a vision for justice, but the Lamb and his followers can. They reach deep into the treasury of Hebrew memory to find a storied history of God's presence at precisely moments such as this.

Two, the song is a constitutive act. It portrays the Lamb and his victors standing as one with Moses and the community of Israel in the ongoing struggle against the beast. It speaks to identity and to identification: this new community of witnesses understands it is participating in the long and broad story of God's liberation. The Apocalypse does not just argue then for faithful action. It creates through singing a community of solidarity that transcends history.⁴³ The past is brought into the present moment through the singing of a hymn, and that hymn constitutes a

⁴³ Thompson, drawing on Turner's work, likewise sees that the heavenly liturgy creates an egalitarian *communitas* (*Apocalypse and Empire*, 69-70).

community of resistance that refuses to accept the dominant definition of reality. A new community is constructed.

Three, and finally, this is a freedom song that celebrates certain victory. As the original song of Moses was a song of jubilation and celebration, as the spiritual-blues impulse is the “beating life force” of the black freedom movement,⁴⁴ this song should be heard in the same way. The song of Moses and the Lamb faces down overwhelming power by singing of memories that produce unyielding hope.

b. Commemoration in other hymns. The “new song” in 5:9-11 rivals the song of Moses and the Lamb for its obvious commemorative tone. Reminiscent of the *anamnesis* of the Eucharist, the song “remembers” Jesus primarily for having been slaughtered. Further, it commemorates what that act has accomplished: it “ransomed” for God saints from every tribe, language, people and nation; it made them a kingdom of priests; and because of this, they will reign on earth. The language of “ransom” here echoes again Exodus language, while the “kingdom of priests” alludes directly to Sinai (Exod 19:6). This multilayered song commemorates what the Lamb has accomplished by reaching back even further before the Lamb, to another memory that helps fill out the meaning of the Lamb’s slaughter. That the Lamb is worthy not because of power but because of self-offering weakness is a peculiar memory that tells an alternative story about the nature of power and victory.⁴⁵

Other hymns are less directly commemorative, but nonetheless full of traditional elements.⁴⁶ Rev 4:8 recalls the *trisagion* of Isaiah 6. Rev 4:11 finds God worthy to rule, because of God’s role in creation. Rev 7:16 picks up the narrative from Isa 49:10 where God’s servants

⁴⁴ Blount, *Can I Get a Witness?*, 93.

⁴⁵ Rowland, *Revelation*, 606.

⁴⁶ For a survey of traditional elements taken up in the hymns, see John J. O’Rourke, “The Hymns of the Apocalypse,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30 (1968): 399-409.

neither hunger nor thirst anymore. The language of the Psalms and the prophets echoes everywhere, so that the hymns can hardly be discerned without reaching deep into the narrative worldview of the Hebrew scriptures. The liturgical world given voice by the hymns, much like the Apocalypse as a whole (previous chapter), is the story-world of Moses, the Hebrew scriptures, and the Lamb.

VII. Implications of the Liturgical Setting

a. Liturgy and ethics. In an article exploring the connections between liturgy and ethics, Don Saliers puts forward two claims:

1. How we pray and worship is linked to how we live, including our desires, emotions, attitudes, beliefs, and actions. However this link is not necessarily direct and causal, but intrinsic and conceptual.
2. The moral life requires a vision of a world, and the continuing exercise of recalling, sustaining, and reentering that picture of the cosmos in which norms and practices have meaning and point.⁴⁷

This connection between liturgy and ethics resonates with aspects of social memory that we explored in Chapter 1. There we saw that memory provides a social frame through which a group interprets its experience and receives its orientation: memory “orients our intentions, sets our moods, and enables us to act.”⁴⁸ Saliers makes explicit the connection between liturgy and memory. He sees that worship is “the primary communal mode of remembering and expressing the Christian faith and the Christian story.”⁴⁹ In worship, a community recalls and gives

⁴⁷ Don E. Saliers, “Liturgy and Ethics: Some New Beginnings,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7.2, 174.

⁴⁸ Schwartz, “Memory as a Cultural System,” 921.

⁴⁹ Saliers, “Liturgy and Ethics,” 175.

expression to a story about the world: liturgy is a place where a community “beholds the world in light of the narrative told, enacted, and pondered in scripture.”⁵⁰

One result of this recalling and beholding is the shaping of a moral life, though Saliers is quick to qualify that the link is not causal but intrinsic. By this he means that worship does not necessarily lead to ethics as cause-and-effect; the interaction is more complex and dynamic. Saliers understands a “moral life” not as a set of ideals to achieve, but as a reorientation of sensibility and intentions, including a new self-understanding and worldview.⁵¹ Like social memory itself, where stories of the past suggest particular identities and courses of action, worship is a “characterizing activity” that reorients sensibility and intentions. Through it, human beings recall and give expression to a story about the world. They begin to embody this story as their own story. Behaviour follows not from rules and commands, but from recalling, sustaining, and reentering a worldview where specific courses of action are called for and given substance and meaning. Liturgy provides ritual space where a worldview can be recalled and sustained.

These claims about liturgy and memory really reflect common understandings of how ritual functions in human societies. Although Saliers is speaking of modern liturgy and not the world of antiquity, his results assist us in thinking about the role of liturgy in the Apocalypse. This suggests that the heavenly liturgy is more than a literary device to reinforce the author’s rhetorical purposes.⁵² It would suggest that the heavenly liturgy is part of a strategy to counter the beast not through persuasion alone but by shaping a listening community that embodies an alternative worldview and ethic. The liturgy, in other words, is more than poetry that “raps on

⁵⁰ Saliers, “Liturgy and Ethics,” 181.

⁵¹ Saliers, “Liturgy and Ethics,” 179.

⁵² Schüssler Fiorenza writes, “John’s prophetic-apocalyptic rhetoric employs conventional cultic vocabulary... not for the sake of persuading his audience to participate in the daily or weekly liturgy. Rather, he uses such cultic language... for the sake of moving his audience to political resistance. He seeks to motivate them either to give obeisance to the power and empire of God and the Lamb or to the dominion of Babylon/Rome” (*Vision*, 103). I argue that a stronger claim can be made about the purpose of cultic language and practice.

Rome” – though it is also that. It is subversive ritual that, insofar as it is adopted into the liturgical life of the *ekklesiai*, cuts through blindness and denial to constitute and sustain an alternative identity.

b. The rite-of-passage. In the liturgical setting of the Apocalypse, John’s audience is transported with him to the heavenly throne room to get a broader perspective on life in Roman Asia Minor. This ritual setting is an experience of liminality, heaven being located at some distance from ordinary affairs. The view offered from this heavenly perspective is rooted, as we have seen, in two movements. The first movement is protest. At the outset of the liturgy, the *ekklesiai* inhabit the world of Roman Asia Minor. Some are quite comfortable there. As they are taken up to the heavenly throne room, they are offered visions of heaven in worship – heaven that gives glory to God and the Lamb *alone*, heaven that sees empire and its personification in the beast as a weak imitation of true worship, heaven that sees empire and the beast threatening God’s people, heaven that sees empire and the beast threatened by visions of justice. These scenes of pathos and protest disorient and deconstruct a worldview that is sympathetic to the imperial vision.

This journey from earth to heaven offers then a new vantage point from which to see and reflect upon the world. It is also symbolic of a *dis-placement* experienced by participants in the liturgy. They cannot return “home” at the conclusion of the liturgy and experience home in the same way. Visions of home are now coloured by the vehement protest and criticism unleashed by heavenly beings. The Apocalypse has revealed what Thompson calls “a deviant knowledge” about the world inhabited by the *ekklesiai*, one that differs markedly from the public account of

reality.⁵³ This deviant knowledge has necessarily changed their perception and experience. A world of innocence and simplicity has been taken from them: home is no longer the same.

The second movement of the heavenly liturgy is, as we have seen, a movement of commemoration. The liturgy recalls and gives expression to the events of Israel and the Exodus and the victory of the vulnerable Lamb. It names *this world* as the *same world* of that prior history: this community as somehow connected and continuous with that one. So the heavenly liturgy establishes (1) a new perspective from which to view and reflect upon the ordinary world, which is through the lens of Moses, the prophets, and the Lamb; and (2) a new community of solidarity to which followers of the Lamb belong. The world previously narrated by the Augustan myth is now re-narrated by an alternative memory. The liturgy has mapped out a new worldview for its audience: a world where God's reign is realized and where God's justice prevails. This "deviant knowledge" stakes its own claim on how the world works and weakens other categories of knowing.

In the Apocalypse John's ritual journey has taken him from Patmos, through heaven, and returned to Patmos where he began. His audience however has been transported from Asia Minor through heaven, and returned to Asia Minor with a different perspective. They return not as "inhabitants of the earth," but with a perspective about their world they did not previously have. Returning from this ritual journey, they inhabit the same streets and landscapes of Roman Asia Minor, but their world has qualitatively changed. They have experienced *dis-placement* through heaven's vehement protest, and now *re-placement* through recollection. They now inhabit a world that has been transformed by the memory of Moses and the Lamb.⁵⁴ To put the matter

⁵³ Thompson, *Apocalypse and Empire*, 193.

⁵⁴ John Gager (*Kingdom and Community*, 56) considers the heavenly liturgy to offer its hearers a temporary escape through a "fleeting experience" of the future. This temporary experience, which comes to an end at the conclusion of the reading, provides the energy needed to strengthen the community and withstand the wrath of the

differently, the “finite province of meaning” that hearers experience in the ritual setting of the Apocalypse becomes their “paramount reality.” The Apocalypse is a charter story that establishes for its hearers a new world.⁵⁵

If John’s purpose is to move the churches from conformity and complacency to radical witness, he has provided liturgy as the means through which this movement can be initiated and sustained. Returning to the “geography of discipleship” of 13:1-14:5, we now see that “proper worship” is a road the alternative community must travel to leave the domain of the beast and join the community of the Lamb at Mount Zion. Liturgy is the setting where an alternative life is shaped, but also the setting where an alternative worldview can be recalled, given expression, and sustained. Sometimes proper worship voices pathos and protest, sometimes celebration and defiant hope. Both are necessary. To join the community of Moses and the Lamb, one must join them in a journey that starts in worship and song and recalls a storied history.

beast. I differ with Gager’s conclusions. The liturgy is not temporary in my view but transformative: the way it has narrated the world sticks with its participants beyond the reading of the Apocalypse. Such a narration requires a sustained practice of recollection and renewal, of course, but it is not transitory.

⁵⁵ Barr, “Oral Enactment,” 255-56.

Chapter 6: Remember, Repent, and Resist

A Summons from Social Conformity to Radical Discipleship

I conclude this study by turning to the seven so-called “letters” in Rev 2-3. In these letters, which are perhaps better understood as prophetic messages or royal edicts (note the *τάδε λέγει* formula in each), the heavenly Christ addresses the *ekklesiai* of Asia Minor.¹ The heavenly Christ offers twice the imperative to remember (2:5, 3:3). In both cases a close relationship is established between memory (*μνημόνευε*) and repentance (*μετανόησαν*), which we will spend some time exploring. Most commentaries unpack the meaning of *μνημόνευε* in a sentence or two, but it should by now be apparent that memory is a much broader strategy of identity and discipleship in the Apocalypse. Such brief treatment hardly does justice to its import and urgency. I conclude then by working with the seven messages to offer a fuller treatment of how the command “remember and repent” functions in the life of the hearing community.

I. Context: Alluring Accommodation

I have suggested throughout this study that we should not be quick to assume that the Apocalypse responds to a campaign of persecution directed against Christians in Asia Minor. To be sure, there is no shortage of blood (6:10, 16:6, 18:24) and martyrs (2:13, 11:7-10) in these pages. Yet we need to be judicious in how we assess the evidence, particularly since there is no reliable historical record that such a persecution happened.² I suggest that the immediate danger to the *ekklesiai* named by the Apocalypse appears not to be persecution, but rather the opposite: followers of the Lamb are in peril because they are being seduced by visions of a comfortable life, with the complacency and compromise that such a pursuit engenders.

¹ On reading these “letters” as prophetic oracles or royal edicts, see Aune (*Revelation 1-5*, 124-29) and Schüssler Fiorenza (*Vision*, 46).

² On the question of persecution, and the consensus among recent scholarship that rejects a Domitianic persecution as the historical setting for the Apocalypse, see Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 69-73. See also Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce*, 34-38, esp. footnote 37, and Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 120-27.

Internal evidence: the seven messages

Following the pattern of praise and censure through the seven messages reveals a great deal of information about the situation of the *ekklesiai* in Asia Minor. The messages offer a mix of praise and censure to varying degrees, with four messages offering both, while two offer only praise, and one offers only censure.

The first message to offer praise and no censure is addressed to followers of the Lamb at Smyrna. Smyrna itself was a wealthy city, but the *ekklesia* found there is described as being afflicted and poor, with some members in danger of being thrown into prison. “I know your tribulation and your poverty,” the heavenly Christ proclaims (2:9). What has caused this precariousness? Some have wondered if early Christianity was a movement among the lower classes of society, so that social precariousness simply reflected being a movement of the poor. That view has been largely dismissed in favour of understanding early Christianity as a broad social movement with all but the extreme upper and lower classes represented.³ Others have wondered if believers in Smyrna are suffering at the hands of hostile neighbours in a setting of persecution. What is most likely, however, noting our earlier analysis of Rev 13, and also the consistent link in the messages between resistance and hardship (e.g. 2:3, 2:24), is that uncompromising Christians have found it difficult to make a living in an economic environment that is thoroughly marked by imperial cults and other manifestations of hegemony. It appears that the assembly at Smyrna has heeded the call to remain faithful to the Lamb and resist the idolatry of empire as it is embodied in the economy.

Embarking then on a boycott and divestment of the imperial economy, believers at Smyrna have refused to be marked with the mark of the beast (13:17). This has led to trouble.

³ Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 161 outlines the interpretive options. On the social cross-section of early Christianity, see below.

They now experience the beast's tangible power to dismiss and exclude those who will not submit to its particular way of doing business. At question is probably their ability to earn a livelihood without becoming entangled in imperial cults and networks of benefaction (see below). Nonparticipation in the "mark of the beast" leads to real hardship. Consequently, fidelity to the Lamb has come at great cost for these believers. They are materially impoverished and condemned to a marginal existence even while their neighbours enjoy considerable wealth. The Lamb has led them not into green pastures but into grueling hardship. Yet in a message full of paradoxes, the heavenly Christ affirms that in their poverty they are actually rich (2:9). The practice of resistance and the hardship that results from challenging business as usual in the empire becomes a place of wealth and promise for disciples of the Lamb.

The second message that offers praise and no censure is addressed to followers of the Lamb at Philadelphia. In this message, the community "has but little *power* (μικρὰν ἐχέεις δύναμιν)," yet in spite of this powerlessness they have "kept my word of patient endurance" and have "not denied my name" (3:8,10). The remark that they have "kept my word" is important, reminding hearers of the aim to which John writes (1:3, 14:12). This community at Philadelphia is exemplary in the eyes of the Apocalypse. They have maintained their fidelity to the Lamb and embodied consistent resistance. But they are vulnerable. Without status or standing in the city, they have begun to look like the Lamb they follow, taking on the Lamb's own weakness and vulnerability. Yet like the paradox of being poor-yet-rich in Smyrna, here the powerlessness of the community is matched by the heavenly Christ's power to open a door for them which no one has *power* (οὐδεὶς δύναται) to shut (3:8).

These two communities are commended for their resistance. They are held up as exemplary followers of the Lamb who have "kept my word of patient endurance" (3:10). Yet as

a result of their discipleship, they are materially poor and socially powerless. Living prophetically in a world governed by the beast is a risky endeavour that sometimes leads to social precariousness. It risks social exclusion, and perhaps even arouses the wrath of the beast. The Apocalypse is not unlike others that have seen that the person who lives a righteous life will be threatened and diminished by the powers, precisely because a righteous life is an inconvenient witness that calls into question the status quo of the powers. The situation of Smyrna and Philadelphia affirm the perspective of Rev 13, that within the Apocalypse's geography of discipleship, one can inhabit a place of security and comfort, or one can stand with the Lamb for justice and righteousness. But in a world governed by the beast, one cannot stand in both places at once.

Turning now to a third message, the situation in Laodicea is not nearly so dire. In fact, quite the opposite is true: this *ekklesia*, much like the city they inhabit, is said to be rich, prosperous, and lacking nothing (3:17). They are well adjusted and comfortable among their neighbours. Yet the heavenly Christ reserves his harshest censure for this community. Not a single word of praise is offered. Jesus names them not rich and prosperous as they believe they are, but wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked – and lacking in zeal (3:19).

Something quite tragic happens at this point. The Eucharist meal is celebrated (3:20).⁴ While the community has gone ahead with the meal, Christ stands outside the door as a stranger (3:20). He waits for someone who will “hear” his voice so he can join the gathering. But no one in Laodicea “hears,” just as no one “sees” their true condition of impoverishment. The comfort and well-adjustedness of the *ekklesia* at Laodicea has deafened them to the voice of the Lamb and isolated them from his presence. Nobody seems to have noticed his absence.

⁴ See Blount, *Revelation*, 83-84, for the Eucharist setting.

In these three examples, the heavenly Christ praises the afflicted and provokes the comfortable. The pattern holds reliably throughout the remaining letters. The *ekklesiai* are censured where there is accommodation and praised where there is faithful resistance (cf. 2:2, 2:3, 2:19, 3:10).⁵ In Pergamum, the balance leans towards praise, with only some “who hold to the teaching of Balaam” and the teaching of “the Nicolaitans” (2:14-15). Similarly in Thyatira, there is condemnation for those who tolerate Jezebel, but “the rest of you” who “do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan,” need only “hold fast” to what they are already doing (2:24-25). In both of these communities, the heavenly Christ acknowledges the work of “holding fast” and “not denying,” and praises “latter works that exceed the first” (2:13, 19). In Sardis, the situation inverts: unlike “some” who have accommodated in Pergamum and Thyatira, in Sardis “only a few names” have not become soiled (3:4). The clear message is “wake up!” (3:2) as the prophetic censure grows harsher. “You have the name of being alive, and you are dead. Awake then, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death” (3:1-2).

A persecuted church?

These examples show that the experience of the *ekklesiai* in Asia Minor is varied, a situation J. Nelson Kraybill has aptly characterized as “a comfortable church with few in trouble.”⁶ It would appear that some Christians like those at Laodicea functioned quite well within imperial society. Of those like Smyrna and Philadelphia who find themselves in trouble, I have suggested that this is not due to persecution on the basis of their confession of Christ, but it is the expected fate of those who provoke and challenge business as usual in the empire, those

⁵ Christopher Rowland characterizes Rev 2-3 as “a series of letters to the angels of the seven churches in Asia Minor in which the Heavenly Christ offers reproof and encouragement in varying degrees, fostering a steadfast witness and the arousal of the complacent from attitudes of compromise” (“The Apocalypse: Hope, Resistance, and the Revelation of Reality,” *Ex Auditu* 6 [1990]: 138-39).

⁶ Kraybill, *Imperial Cult*, 30-38.

who refuse to fit in and get along as accomplices in the empire's way of life. At issue in their experience of hardship is not the confession of Christ in and of itself, but the expected result of presenting a persistent challenge to the ideology of empire and refusing to participate in its idolatrous life.

One challenge faced by those who resisting the ideology of empire is the question of economic livelihood, which brought the average person into regular contact with imperial ideology. "To compete economically and politically," Kraybill writes, "businesspeople had to participate in emperor worship and other rituals."⁷ This included, for example, participating in various associations (trade guilds, among others). The focus of these associations was not always occupational,⁸ but such gatherings provided artisans, traders, and other professionals the opportunity to develop business networks and social connections.⁹ Associations provided a place where individuals could link themselves into networks within wider civic society. These associations frequently involved cult rituals, with food being an important component. It was common during their gatherings for assemblies to offer sacrifices to the *Sebastoi* and to other patron gods. The sacrifice was followed or accompanied by a banquet.¹⁰ This can explain the preoccupation in the seven messages with consumption of sacrificed food (2:15, 2:20): such consumption signals a broader participation in association life and ritual practices by those Christians wanting to fit in with civic society. Thus participation in banquets, and association life generally, offered political, economic, and professional advantages.¹¹ Yet for those wanting to avoid entanglement with imperial religious life, it would be difficult to navigate membership in

⁷ Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, 160.

⁸ Philip Harland proposes a typology of associations: family, ethnic, neighbourhood, occupational, and cultic (*Associations*, 29). Certain occupations (dyers and merchants, for example) strongly implied participation in their respective trade guild (38). It was possible to maintain connections with more than one association at a time. These associations provided a place to work out social connections.

⁹ Kraybill, *Imperial Cult*, 113-14.

¹⁰ Harland, *Associations*, 77.

¹¹ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, 56.

many associations. Withdrawal or limited participation could become necessary in many places. But this could also raise social suspicions, and make it difficult to develop economic and social prospects.

Depending on one's profession, further entanglement with imperial ideology and power was unavoidable. Shippers and maritime traders benefitted from direct support from Rome, which built harbours, stationed soldiers to guard against fire, and secured maritime routes against piracy.¹² For this, merchants ensured a steady supply of grain and luxury items to Rome, a situation the Apocalypse finds deplorable (6:6, 18:11-17). Meanwhile, imperial and "pagan" symbols and rituals were ubiquitous in maritime ports,¹³ so Christian merchants could hardly avoid them. This is perhaps what John means when he claims no one can buy or sell without the mark of the beast (13:17). Most professionals had some degree of contact with imperial cults and ideology, and would be linked in some way into an extensive network of client-benefactor relationships extending all the way to the emperor.

Kraybill's study of cult and commerce in the empire identifies two main paths of social mobility available to members of Jewish and Christian communities.¹⁴ The first path is the military route. Though it is questionable that non-citizens served in Rome's legions, auxiliary troops frequently consisted of slaves and other non-citizens wishing to serve Rome and advance in society. The military path, Kraybill notes, was generally avoided by Jews and Christians alike, potentially because of aversion to images (military standards), idolatry (the excesses of imperial cults in military camps), and violence. A second path was to be preferred, the path of business and commerce.

¹² Kraybill, *Imperial Cult*, 117-23.

¹³ Kraybill, *Imperial Cult*, 125-31.

¹⁴ Kraybill, *Imperial Cult*, 86-101

Indeed, a wide variety of sources suggest that many Christians in the first century were active in the marketplace.¹⁵ Lydia, a merchant in purple cloth, was wealthy enough to own property and accommodate guests (Acts 16:14). Phoebe is of sufficient means to be a “benefactor to many” (Rom 16:2). Priscilla and Aquila are fellow tent-makers with Paul, and own property in Rome (Rom 16:3-5). We read in James of a congregation that includes both wealthy and poor, and the challenges that attend this mix (Jas 2:1-4). Some in Ephesus are wealthy enough to own slaves (Eph 6:9, see also Philemon). In his survey of Pauline congregations, Wayne Meeks finds within these congregations a mix of all social levels well represented, except the extreme upper and lower classes. “The ‘typical’ Christian, the one who most often signals his presence in the letters by one or another small clue, is a free artisan or small trader. Some even in those occupational categories had houses, slaves, the ability to travel, and other signs of wealth.”¹⁶ Philip Harland, while not focusing specifically on economics, similarly finds signs of positive interaction between Christian communities and broader civic life. He warns against exaggerating the conflict between first-century Christian communities and the empire, observing that these congregations “could in many respects live and work peaceably alongside others in the civic context and, as groups, participate in some aspects of life in the polis under Roman rule.”¹⁷

At issue in the Apocalypse, then, is not a setting of persecution, for which we have no reliable historical evidence, but whether followers of the Lamb will yield to enormous pressures to accommodate to the political, economic, and liturgical life of the empire, all of which John

¹⁵ Kraybill, *Imperial Cult*, 94-100.

¹⁶ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 73.

¹⁷ Harland, *Associations*, 264. Note especially his discussion on “positive interaction” (213-37) and “tensions in perspective” (239-64), where he suggests that while Jewish synagogues and Christian congregations generally avoided the practice of honoring emperors as divinity, the majority of these groups otherwise adapted well to civic life and civic participation.

saw as demonic. “At stake here was the question of assimilation,” Adela Yarbro Collins affirms. “What pagan customs could Christians adopt for the sake of economic survival, commercial gain, or simple sociability?”¹⁸ Those who like John believed all entanglements with the beast were to be avoided would be forced to avoid many aspects of civic life, raising serious concerns for their economic viability and social connectedness. They would be closing the door on opportunities for social mobility. Like the *ekklesiai* at Smyrna and Philadelphia, such disciples would be committing to a life of precariousness in order to follow the path of the Lamb “wherever he goes” (14:4), a path that leads downwards through vulnerability to slaughter.

Teachers of compromise

Given these pressures to accommodate to life as empire has organized it, and the unappealing alternative of vulnerability and precariousness, it is unsurprising that some would seek more pragmatic visions of Christian discipleship. Is it not possible to follow Christ *and* be good civic citizens with comfortable, secure lives? Teachers identified as Balaam (2:14) and Jezebel (2:20), and also a mysterious group known as the Nicolaitans (2:6, 2:15),¹⁹ apparently offered precisely this, teaching that there is no problem in eating food that has been sacrificed to idols. This permissiveness was probably not rooted in a movement to abandon Christian faith and worship other gods:²⁰ it was rather a pragmatic solution that would allow Christians of antiquity to worship Jesus and also participate in the associations and festivals that characterized

¹⁸Adela Yarbro Collins, “Persecution and Vengeance in the Book of Revelation,” in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, ed. D. Hellholm (Tübingen: Mhor, 1983), 740-41.

¹⁹ On the enigmatic identity of the Nicolaitans, see Aune (*Revelation 1-5*, 148-49). It is likely that this was a group of prophets active in Asia Minor with whom John found himself in competition. The name, if it functions symbolically the same way Balaam and Jezebel are symbolic, could mean “the one who conquers the laity” (Blount, *Revelation*, 58), just as Balaam is “the one who consumes the people.”

²⁰ “Since ‘honoring the image of the emperor’ did not demand creedal adherence but was a civil-political gesture, some might have argued it was possible to do so without compromising one’s faith” (Schüssler Fiorenza, “Followers of the Lamb,” 138).

civic life.²¹ This pragmatic theology of “making peace with empire” would open doors for social and economic advancement, permitting Christians to live more comfortably with some degree of economic security, and to participate actively in the life of the *polis* and the empire.

Undoubtedly Balaam and Jezebel are not real names for these teachers. John selects these names as symbols because he needs his hearers to understand that this permissive vision of discipleship, which many may easily have received as simple “common sense” teaching, repeats the error of two great antagonists of Hebrew folklore. Both Balaam (Num 31:16) and Jezebel (1 Kgs 16:31-33) encouraged modalities of syncretism. Balaam is accused of encouraging Israel’s men to take for themselves women from Moab, itself a problematic move, and those women in turn encouraged Israel’s men to offer sacrifices to Moab’s gods (Num 25:1-5). Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab, plays a similar role in building altars to Baal and hosting Baal’s prophets while murdering the prophets of YHWH (1 Kgs 18:4, 19). In a classic confrontation between Elijah and Jezebel’s prophets, Elijah asks the people, “how long will you go on limping with two different options? If YHWH is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kgs 18:21). Balaam and Jezebel teach that it is possible to pursue two options, following the Lamb while cooperating with the beast. John like Elijah forces his people to make a choice about where their allegiances lie.

The presence of Balaam elsewhere in the New Testament is suggestive. Balaam appears in both 2 Pet 2:14-16 (“Balaam... who loved the wages of doing wrong”) and Jude 11 (“they... abandon themselves to Balaam’s error for the sake of gain”). Both texts remember Balaam as one who encourages the pursuit of idolatry for material gain, so that “Balaam’s error” represents the error of those who with “hearts trained in greed” (2 Pet 2:14) get all tangled up in the business of idolatry. While “greed” may seem a harsh assessment of the seven *ekklesiai* given

²¹ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Vision*, 56.

that some degree of accommodation appeared necessary to earn a basic livelihood, John himself seems rather unapologetic about the demands of discipleship he places before them. If John shares the critique of Balaam with 2 Peter and Jude, which seems likely given his harsh critique of wealth and imperial economics elsewhere, then Balaam provides a mnemonic cipher that cuts through a seemingly common-sense position and uncovers the reality that is at the root of these teachings. These teachers of accommodation are too concerned with practicalities like wages, and not concerned enough with the very real possibility that the pursuit of wages might lead to entanglement in the sins of the empire (18:4-5).

That Balaam and Jezebel are accused of teaching “fornication” (2:14, 20) leads to one of the primary images the Apocalypse uses for Rome’s influence. The image of fornication (πορνείαι) denotes not a sexual act between humans, but entanglement with “the great harlot who is seated upon many waters” (17:1-6).²² Like the vision of the so-called “chaste men” in 14:1-5, the critique is not sexual ethics, but political entanglements.²³ In 18:3 and 18:9 these entanglements are attached to commerce, power, and wealth.²⁴ The Hebrew prophets often imagined the pull of idolatry as sexual seduction (e.g. Hos 2:2-13), and Proverbs likewise describes the path of the unfaithful as a “loose woman” who seduces the young and the simple to abandon the path of Wisdom for short-sighted gain (Prov 7:4-27). Rome, the great harlot of the Apocalypse, offers an attractive vision of social mobility and economic prosperity, but those who follow it become entangled in all kinds of evil (recalling that in John’s vision, behind Rome

²² πορνείαι appears five times in the Apocalypse: here in 2:14 and 2:20, and again in 17:2, 18:3, and 18:9. These latter usages all envision the inhabitants of the earth “fornicating” with the “great whore” Rome.

²³ While this image helpfully clarifies how Rome exercised power over Asia Minor, it is not a good image for women. As in our previous discussion of the “chaste men” in 14:1-5, the misogyny of the Apocalypse is obvious, trenchant, and regrettable. See the notes from our previous discussion for the various approaches taken by scholars attentive to this gendered language.

²⁴ Yeatts writes, “Revelation uses the image of sexual immorality to speak of accommodation with the idolatrous materialism of Rome” (*Revelation*, 84-5).

stands the power of Satan). With this image, the Apocalypse joins others in naming the strong pull towards a way of life that is foreign to YHWH as comparable to seduction.

The allurement of accommodation is strong. We have identified two primary ways it operates. One, through imperial memory, myth, and the structuring of civic space, the beast has power to structure the world and to define what is real and normal and mere common sense. Two, through economic affairs, the beast offers an attractive vision of the benefits of accommodation, while those who resist this “natural ordering” are seen as aberrant and war is made against them (13:7, 17).

II. Remember and Repent

The rhetoric of repentance is central to the seven messages. This rhetoric takes shape in the context of accommodation named above: some among the *ekklesiai* have been seduced by visions of a comfortable life, which has resulted in compromised discipleship and witness. Repentance is not strictly a spiritual reorientation here, though a deep “healing” is indeed required (e.g. 3:18). Rather, repentance in these messages involves a reorientation of life-practice and clarification of allegiances. This connection between repentance and life-practice is sustained not only in the messages to the *ekklesiai*, but also in relation to the nations who are likewise expected to repent (9:20-21).²⁵ However, the message of the Apocalypse is not addressed to these “outsiders,” but to the *ekklesiai* who profess to be followers of the Lamb.

Anyone looking to find in the New Testament a soteriology of “faith and not works” will not find an easy companion in the Apocalypse.²⁶ The clear target of these messages is the *works*

²⁵ The presence of “the nations” in the New Jerusalem (21:24-7) and “great multitudes” around the throne of God (7:4, 9) suggests that while the Apocalypse sets the bar very high for ethical behaviour, and while it excludes those who do not meet it (21:27), and while the *ekklesiai* find themselves in danger of being among those excluded, the final vision is one where *many* are included in the Apocalypse’s horizons of salvation.

²⁶ For more on “faith and works” in the Apocalypse, see for example the discussion in Yeatts, *Revelation*, 85. See also Aune (“Following the Lamb,” 283): “There is no dichotomy here between law and grace... Rather,

of the *ekklesiai*. The formula “I know your works (τὰ ἔργα σου)” introduces five of the seven messages. “I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you as your works (τὰ ἔργα ὑμῶν) deserve” (2:23). If the target of the rhetoric is works, then its clear intent is correction. The Apocalypse does not hold forth forgiveness for the spiritually penitent while they carry on their business with empire; rather, it blesses those who *hear* and who *keep* its vision of radical disconformity (1:3). Repentance leads to a concrete, visible, and costly change in praxis. The Apocalypse counsels that followers of the Lamb, who have been allured into accommodation by the beast, urgently change their path and embrace a radical discipleship equally in matters of economics, social relations, and political allegiances, as in matters of the heart.

But as Johns points out, repentance in the Apocalypse does not mean simply exchanging one set of behaviours for another.²⁷ Repentance is multifaceted and the desired outcome more dynamic than that. It includes seeing the world in a different way, recognizing Rome and the emperor for the beasts that they are, saying no to the pragmatic compromises offered not only by the beast but also by others in the believing community, and staking one’s life on the claim that the Lamb’s path to victory through vulnerability is reliable, even in a world where all signs point to the contrary. This last point is critical. When the hegemonic power of the beast is pressing in from all sides, it takes something deep to sustain walking the Lamb’s path as though God’s blessing resides there. Memory can articulate a tradition that runs deep enough to sustain an alternative life of discipleship when that life has become very costly.

What then should we make of the word-pair “remember and repent”? While I have already begun to answer that question, I want to continue in two ways, first by looking at the two

obedience to the will of God as mediated by the Torah is considered complementary to the demands of faith in Christ.”

²⁷ Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 171.

verses where the word-pair is featured, then by drawing connections to three key issues in memory studies.

Remember then from what you have fallen (2:5)

The first “remember and repent” is found in the message to Ephesus. The community at Ephesus is censured for having “abandoned the love you had at first” (2:4), but at the same time the heavenly Christ knows their “works” and commends them for their “toil and consistent resistance” (2:2). They appear to be doing well, yet something has been lost. The counsel to “remember and repent” is bounded on either side by two “firsts”: “you have abandoned the love you had at first” (2:4) and “repent and do the works you did at first” (2:5). While it is clear that the community needs to remember in order to recover a love and practice they once had, the text is just a little enigmatic. What “love” has been abandoned, and what “works” are to be recovered? Is it their love of Christ, their love for one another, or both?²⁸

The connection has not been made in the commentaries, but probably should be, to Jeremiah 2:

I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown... What did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves? They did not say, ‘Where is the LORD who brought us up from the land of Egypt....’ (Jer 2:2,5)

This passage from Jeremiah speaks of Israel’s young (first?) love and devotion, which yields to forgetfulness, idolatry, and the pursuit of “things that do not profit” (Jer 2:8, 11). It reflects much of the context in Rev 2-3: Israel loses the memory of the Exodus, and her prophets preach Baal, “playing the whore with many lovers” (Jer 3:1). Israel turns to imperial power for profit and well-being: to Egypt “to drink the waters of the Nile,” and to Assyria “to drink the waters of the Euphrates” (Jer 2:18). We see the loss of memory yielding disaster for Israel’s life with YHWH,

²⁸ For varied perspectives, see Blount (*Revelation*, 51) and Fee (*Revelation*, 27).

as it quickly accommodates to the centres of regional hegemony. Israel's denial runs deep (Jer 2:23), like the *ekklesiai* of Asia Minor, unable to see that something has gone terribly wrong. This Jeremiah text appears to be the dreaded fulfillment of Deut 8:11-20, another text that is useful in the context of the seven messages to the *ekklesiai*:

Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments... When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them... Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.' But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth...

In Deut 8:11-20, comfort and wealth give way to amnesia, and amnesia means "you shall surely perish" (Deut 8:20). If all these connections can be sustained, then the "first love" of Ephesus is their love of YHWH, and their "first works" are the commandments of God.

While connections to these texts in Jeremiah and Deuteronomy are tantalizing, perhaps the best we can say of Rev 2:5 with any certainty is, as Aune writes, "they are exhorted to remember their previous condition and with that in mind to repent and behave as they once did."²⁹ Brian Blount has made a different connection, from "the works you did at first" (2:5) to the message to Thyatira at 2:19, the only other place the Apocalypse speaks of love (*ἀγαπην*) and connects it to works.³⁰ Here, "works" include love, faith, service, and consistent resistance. It could well be said that love, faith, and service are "habits of resistance," and the community at Ephesus must recover these. But again, the connection is a little thin. We best allow some room for uncertainty, and with Aune hold to a more generic conclusion that a "previous condition" – whatever it was – was once embraced, and while the community continues its work of resistance, that work has lost its sharpness.

²⁹ Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 155.

³⁰ Blount, *Revelation*, 50-51.

The picture that unfolds in Ephesus is the picture of a community that is deeply engaged in the work of resisting empire. They do not grow weary and are fully committed to “bearing up for my name’s sake” (2:2-3). Yet they have lost their sharpness. They need habits of memory to refresh and sustain the life God has for them.

Unlike others addressed in the seven messages, this community is not in danger of abandoning their work. But they are in danger of losing God’s presence in the work.³¹ The “memory work” they are to engage, I suggest, is modeled by John throughout the Apocalypse. It is to read the “old story” and reclaim it for life in first-century Asia Minor. It is to worship God and the Lamb. It is to celebrate the Eucharist. It is to heed the warning that “prophecy cannot be separated very long from doxology, or it will wither or become ideology.”³² It is to remain mindful that their work of resistance has deep roots in both the spirit and story of God, and cannot be sustained without nurturing both connections.

Remember what you have received and heard (3:3)

The second “remember and repent” is found in the message to Sardis. This community is much closer to the context discussed earlier: the censure takes aim at accommodating practices.³³ It aims to move the community from slumbering accommodation to awakened resistance, so they might be prepared for the hour that Christ will “come like a thief.” The message counsels the community at Sardis: “remember what you received and heard; keep that, and repent.”

The formula “what you have received and heard” is a technical one in the New Testament. While we cannot be sure exactly what the content of reception includes, the formula

³¹ The danger is that Christ will come and “remove your lampstand from its place” (2:5). The seven lampstands (1:12-13) have in the midst of them “one like a son of man”.

³² Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 17. Brueggemann is drawing on the work of Abraham Heschel, who sees that doxology is “the last full act of human freedom and justice.”

³³ The community in Sardis is seen to have a few who have not soiled/defiled their garments (οὐκ ἐμόλυναν τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτῶν). This language is used only in 14:4 with the so-called “chaste men” who have not defiled themselves, a metaphor for becoming entangled in the sins of empire.

points to a tradition or teaching that has been handed down from others. The verb form λαμβάνω from 3:3 is unique in this usage; its closely related παραλαμβάνω is found in Phil 4:9 (“what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me”), Col 2:6-7 (“you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him... just as you were taught...”), 1 Thess 2:13 (“when you received the word of God which you heard from us”), 2 Thess 3:6 (“according to the tradition you received from us”). The pattern evidenced through all these examples is the learning of a tradition, now to be acted upon.

Aune writes, “the first pair of verbs... probably refers to the Christian traditions transmitted to the Sardinians when their congregation was founded.”³⁴ While Aune and Blount both suggest that these traditions were received directly from John or someone in John’s prophetic circle, there is nothing to preclude the possibility that it points more broadly to Hebrew and Christian traditions that the community has inherited as followers of the Lamb and therefore bearers of those stories. The tradition they have “received and heard” must include at the very least the Hebrew scriptures that are the foundation of the Apocalypse. If that were not the case, the strategy of re-placing the communities in this tradition would be rather misguided.

The next imperative “keep that” is used extensively within the Apocalypse. The list includes keeping “what is written in this prophecy” (1:3, 22:7, 22:9), “my works” (2:26), “my word of patient endurance” (3:8, 10), “the commands of God” (12:17, 14:12), “garments” (16:15). Each points either to an ethical instruction (works, commands, and garments) or to a spoken/written tradition (this prophecy, “my word”). The imperative “keep” stands in relation to that which is “received and heard,” so what is “remembered” refers loosely to a group of traditions that are the basis for ethical action, including rejecting accommodating practices and adopting a lifestyle of consistent resistance. Circumstantially, since the Apocalypse calls here to

³⁴ Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 221.

“remember” and “keep” a tradition, and since it will proceed through its entirety to recall traditions that point to ethical action, we can assume that the Apocalypse fills out the content of the memory for which it calls.

In both 2:5 and 3:3, memory is the sustaining life-source for communities that embrace a radical alternative to empire. In the case of Ephesus, the work of resistance is being done, but risks becoming dried up and cut off from the roots that gave it birth. The community’s work needs a fresh infusion of memory and spirit to remain grounded in the living presence of the heavenly Christ. In the case of Sardis, having forgotten their tradition means they have lost their way amongst the allure of empire, and the community’s discipleship is on life support. The recovery of a memory means awakening to this reality and reshaping lives of awakened resistance.

Issues of identity, perception, and praxis

It occurs to me that this counsel to repent, having a more dynamic meaning than strictly an exchange of behaviours, includes at least three issues that are, as we saw in Chapter 1, related to memory.

Identity. Identity is contested vigorously by the Apocalypse. We see in the seven messages that many followers of the Lamb in Asia Minor worked out the question *who are we?* in a complex, multivalent way. On the one hand, being among John’s audience, they undoubtedly felt some affinity among the community of Lamb-followers. On the other hand, assemblies, cults, and festivals were primary places where a Roman identity was forged, and many welcomed participation in these activities and even engaged commerce and other business as regular citizens of the Roman polis. These identities intersect and interact, so the question of accommodation is not uniquely a question of behaviour, but also a question of identity and

identification. Does the identity “disciple of the Lamb” accept or preclude the identity “citizen of the Roman polis”?

The Apocalypse settles that question in a most definitive way in the geography of discipleship (13:1-14:5), as we have seen. It drives a hard wedge between disciples of the Lamb and disciples of the beast, with the climatic point emerging when John names the power of Rome as analogous to the power of Satan. The seven letters function in a similar way, with their well-defined pattern of praise and censure. The main strategy of identity in the Apocalypse, however, seems to connect hearers with a broader community that stands separate and apart from empire. The Apocalypse grounds followers of the Lamb in a broad, storied community of identification and belonging.

Markers of identity offered as alternatives to “citizen of the polis” include “kingdom of priests,” “saints,” and “fellow servants.” The “kingdom of priests” moniker (1:6, 5:10, 20:6), as we have seen, reaches back to Sinai to the formation of a “holy nation” that is alternative to Pharaoh’s Egypt. It stands in contrast to the kingdom of Rome. This is political language, but it is also identity language which connects the community of disciples to a different “kingdom” that carries the story of early Israel.³⁵

Elsewhere, witnesses of the Lamb are seen to stand together with the tribes of early Israel (7:4-8), with the 144,000 on Mount Zion (14:3), with Moses and Elijah (11:6, 15:3). John is “your brother, who shares with you in Jesus” (1:9). Angels are “fellow servants with you and your comrades” (19:10). The prophets are also named as “brothers” in 22:9, and a connection is made between witnesses of the Lamb and all the prophets and saints (11:18). In 18:20, the

³⁵ “Kingdom of priests” is ambiguous and the meaning may focus more on vocation than belonging, in the sense of “a royalty of priests” or “priestlike kings” (Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 47). Going back to Exod 19:6 though, we find “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” where invoking the language of nationhood carries the sense of both vocation and belonging.

hearing community is presumed to stand with heaven, saints, apostles, and prophets – not with the kings, merchants, and shipmasters of Rome – celebrating Rome’s defeat. All of these identifications construct a community with particular affinities and boundaries.

The identity of the community of Lamb-followers flows then from a different story. Identity is rooted in the Hebrew scriptures and the story of the Lamb rather than the Augustan myth. At the same time, this identity is rooted in a different community. The community of belonging is not the community of empire gathered around the uniting figure of the emperor: it is instead the community of saints, apostles, and prophets, the “cloud of witnesses” to borrow language from Hebrews 12, who have gone before and inhabited the vocation of being the people of God in moments of historical crisis. The *ekklesiai* continue the long story of God’s prophets and God’s people living among the powers. They take their example from the cloud of witnesses, and their identity is forged in the Eucharist. The process of repentance is also therefore a process of remembering and finding root in the ongoing performance of this storied community.

Perception. A second dimension to the rhetoric of repentance is the issue of perception, the capacity for vision to see and discern the nature of the world. Sight formulates each new vision (“and I saw” καὶ εἶδον), and a basic equivalence is established between “seeing” and “knowing”, as in the introduction to each of the seven messages (“I know your works” οἶδά σου τὰ ἔργα) and in 7:14.

The issue of sight relates to perspective: does a true perspective shape one’s vision, or has the beast with its ability to shape reality distorted the ability to “see” truly? This is most pressing at Laodicea, which neither “hears” the voice of Jesus nor “sees” the true nature of their condition. They see themselves as rich and prosperous, yet the heavenly Christ sees that in

reality they are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. They are counseled to buy “salve to anoint [their] eyes” (3:18) and heal their distorted vision.

In contrast to these whose vision needs healing, the four living creatures surrounding the throne are covered with eyes front and back. These heavenly creatures see deeply into the nature of reality as they lead the throne room in worship (4:6), so that worship in the Apocalypse, as discussed in a previous chapter, is a ritual space that proceeds from a deep “seeing” into reality as heaven discerns it. Similarly, the Lamb with seven eyes has complete perception (5:6). The Apocalypse itself is a “revelation” or “unmasking” of reality that flows from Jesus Christ, the one who sees completely (1:1).³⁶ Its intent, as Christopher Rowland has written, is to “reveal something hidden which will enable the readers to view their present situation from a completely different perspective.”³⁷ The Apocalypse, in other words, presents a heavenly perspective of earthly reality. It helps the hearing community “see” and “revision” the world they inhabit.³⁸ “The most significant battle in the Apocalypse,” Johns writes, “is therefore a battle for *perception* fought on the rhetorical battlefield.”³⁹

A theology of accommodation can be attributed partially to distorted perception. Like the community at Laodicea, those who feel they can “make peace with empire” have apparently not correctly discerned the nature of the beast. They need “salve” to heal their vision. Perhaps their vision has been distorted by an ideology that celebrates empire as a force for good, a saviour and benefactor and the beginning of glad tidings. Perhaps they have been seduced by visions of security and economic benefit. Perhaps because empire has power to structure and define reality,

³⁶ ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ could be translated in the objective genitive “a revelation of Jesus Christ”, but is more likely in the subjective genitive “a revelation from Jesus Christ.” This reading is supported by the next phrase, “he (Jesus Christ) made it known...” See Blount (*Revelation*, 27) and Aune (*Revelation 1-5*, 6).

³⁷ Rowland, “Hope, Resistance, and the Revelation of Reality,” 136.

³⁸ David Barr’s work, “Apocalypse as Symbolic Transformation,” is particularly insightful on this point.

³⁹ Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 180.

they are simply blind or in denial of any alternative option. What is needed is a “change of mind” (repentance) about empire, a “revisioning” of its reality, and a “reimagining” of possibilities.

The Apocalypse remembers Daniel’s vision of four beasts, Ezekiel’s tirade against Tyre, the imperial archetype Babylon, and even further back to the plagues of the Exodus. These stories provide a lens to reinterpret the reality of empire, helping the compromised community see their world in a different way. Drawing on deep symbols that have particular meaning in a particular history, and connecting the hearing community to that history, this narrative memory cuts through the myths and ideologies of empire to see the world from a different perspective. Namely, the world is “re-narrated” through the lens of Moses, the Lamb, and the prophets, so that memory is a “salve” that heals vision.⁴⁰

Praxis. The final dimension of repentance is of course behaviour. We have already seen that the Apocalypse seeks to awaken a social radicalism, calling the *ekklesiai* to leave behind comfort and accommodation to embrace an alternative life of bold witness and costly resistance. These actions of witness and resistance are modeled in, and given meaning by, the memory of the Exodus and the suffering vulnerability of the Lamb.

The praxis called for includes not only acts of witness and resistance, but also those routines that are necessary to sustain an alternative identity in a world governed by the beast. These “habits of resistance” are not described directly, but are modeled by the composition itself. To repeat the list from above, “habits of resistance” include reading the “old story” and reclaiming it for life in first-century Asia Minor, worshipping God and the Lamb, celebrating the Eucharist, and remaining mindful that the work of resistance has deep roots in both the spirit and

⁴⁰ This connection between memory and vision is not unique to the Apocalypse. Jesus elsewhere challenges uncomprehending disciples, “Having eyes, do you not see, and having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember?” (Mk 8:18) He then proceeds to restore the sight of a blind man, a healing that is clearly symbolic in relation to the dialogue immediately preceding (Mk 8:22-26).

story of God, and cannot be sustained without nurturing both. These products and processes of memory nurture the inner life of the alternative community, making possible a sustained and energized discipleship that resists being co-opted by the dominant discourse.

An opening verse of the Apocalypse reads, “Blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written” (1:3). The Apocalypse is not a book of other-worldly visions to comfort and intrigue. It is a “discipleship manual” for the church living in the midst of empire. Its intent is to shape and sustain communities of discipleship that witness to the rule of the Lamb and resist the power of the beast. This witness is carried through both vulnerability and alterity – by embracing a costly social radicalism that resists all compromise and complicity with the sins of the beast, and through active witness which presents an unwelcome challenge to power.⁴¹

The word-pair “remember and repent” functions within this overall rhetorical purpose to shape and sustain an alternative community of discipleship. Repentance has sights deeper than a simple shift in behaviours: it requires that followers of the Lamb revision their world, evaluate their place within it, and work out an alternative identity and practice. In the Apocalypse, memory is the basis on which an alternative identity is staked and an alternative practice is learned.

⁴¹ “It is not a vision designed to make the community passive or to disempower it or to encourage it to withdraw in a cloistered existence. It is a vision designed to empower the community to enter the fray with a courageous nonviolent resistance that may well lead to martyrdom” (Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 205).

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